

JEEVADHARA

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

FAITH AND UNFAITH

THE FAITH THAT MAKES US WHOLE

Samuel Rayan

THE DIALECTICS OF FAITH AND UNFAITH

S. Kappen

THE CHALLENGE OF ATHEISM

Poulose Mar Poulose

WOMEN LIVE THEIR FAITH IN A SEXIST CHURCH

Flavia D'Souza

GOD KNOWS WHY YOU WOMEN WEEP
AND WEEPS WITH YOU

Aruna Gnanadasan

THE UNIVERSE OF FAITH AND
THE PLURIVERSE OF SYMBOLS

Francis X. D'Sa

FAITH AND SYMBOLS: THE FLUTE AND
THE CHAKRA, THE CROSS AND THE CRESCENT

M. Amaladoss

DISCUSSION FORUM

John B. Chethimattam

BOOK REVIEWS

May 1990

JEEVADHARA

is published every month
alternately in English and Malayalam

GENERAL EDITOR

Joseph Constantine Manalel

SECTION EDITORS

The Human Problem

Felix Wilfred

C. Thomas Abraham

The Word of God

Paul Kalluveettil

George Kaniarakam

The Living Christ

Samuel Rayan

Cherian Menachery

The People of God

Kuncheria Pathil

George Karakunnel

The Meeting of Religions

John B. Chethimattam

John Peter Muringathery

The Fulness of Life

Felix Podimattam

Mathew Parinthisikal

Literary Editor: Philips Vadakekalam

SECTIONAL BOARD OF EDITORS

Cyril Mar Baselios

Thomas Mampra

Bosco Puthur

Cyprian Illickamury

Christopher Duraisingh

George Keerankeri

EDITOR - BOOK REVIEW

J. B. Chethimattam

JEEVADHARA

The Living Christ

FAITH AND UNFAITH

Editor:

SAMUEL RAYAN

Jeevadhara
Kottayam - 686 017
Kerala, India
Tel. (0091) 481. 7430

Vol XX No. 117

May 1990

CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	165
The Dialectic of Faith and Unfaith	169
<i>S. Kappen</i>	
The Challenge of Atheism	174
<i>Poulose Mar Poulose</i>	
Women Live their Faith in a Sexist Church	182
<i>Flavia D'Souza</i>	
God Knows why You Women Weep and Weeps with You	189
<i>Aruna Gnanadason</i>	
The Universe of Faith and the Pluriverse of Symbols	197
<i>Francis X. D'Sa</i>	
Faith and Symbols	209
The Flute and the Chakra, the Cross and the Crescent	
<i>M. Amaladoss</i>	
The Faith that Makes us Whole	221
<i>Samuel Rayan</i>	
Discussion Forum	241
<i>John B. Chethimattam</i>	
Book Reviews	246

Editorial

This volume of Jeevadhara carries a series of brief meditations on Faith which makes us whole, and on symbols which embody it, and on unfaith, its absence. Faith as a conception and sense of meaning of ourselves, of our social existence and of our history, is central to life. That is reason enough to go to it on a devout pilgrimage from time to time. There are additional reasons too for reflecting on faith. Faith is one of those words put so much to daily use as to become worn out in its lines and images. Some meditation might help us restore its clarity and sharpness. Like all vital words, faith keeps gathering to itself a wealth of associations which then envelop it and might delay direct experience of its core reality. There are species of preaching, not only in evangelistic movements but in mainline churches as well, which tend simplistically to reduce faith to a set of religious words or the repetition of creeds. And finally different conceptions of faith seem to be the point at issue in many a conflict and controversy raging in the church(es) at the moment. One might recall the context from which sprang *The Cologne Statement* of German theologians (January 1989) which was later supported by thousands of thinking christians everywhere; or remember the *Call to Dialogue in the Catholic Church* issued by French-speaking European theologians (March 1989); or the Spanish theologians' Declaration of support for these positions (April 1989); and the warning given by Belgium's General Council of Lay Apostolate (May 1989) against the Church's playing into the hands of the powerful, and condemning those who live in solidarity with the deprived. One may still have memories of earlier tensions of the 1980s between the Vatican on the one hand and Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Bishop Hunthausen, Charles Curran, Louis Bermejo, Women Religious of the USA, Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, the Jesuits, the Carmelites etc. on the other. In every case the crux of the matter was not simply discipline or law and order; it was faith, divergent conceptions and experiences of faith. This is true also of tensions and con-

flicts nearer home in the church in India, in Kerala for instance, between bishops and priests, between clergy and laity, between different language groups, between those committed to the struggles of deprived sections like the fisherfolk and those unconcerned about the plight of the dispossessed or opposed to their organized action.

In the meditation on 'The faith that Makes us Whole' S. Rayan seeks to discern from the Gospel narratives the faith of Jesus and his disciples. Faith is not religious verbiage; it is the latter, not faith, that is easily manipulated in favour of profit and power. S. Kappen describes faith in terms of openness to the Divine addressing us in gifts and challenges. Various distortions of faith are illustrated and three types of atheism distinguished. Poulose Mar Poulose continues the discussion on atheism and pleads for a positive approach to this vast phenomenon, seeing that its core lies not so much in a denial of God as in the affirmation of human greatness to be achieved through free and corporate endeavour. Flavia D'Souza and Aruna Gnanadason are telling us what it means to have and live the faith in a sexist church with patriarchic scriptures and frame of mind. They highlight stories of faith and faithfulness under severe testing and underline faith testimonies, faith-protests and faith-criticism of the church, together with attempts to restructure symbols to meet an obtuseness which lacks the sensitivity that characterises the human and the faithful. F. D'Sa and M. Amaladoss deal with faith and faith's symbols. Faith is fundamental openness and response to Reality, to the Cosmic and the Human, and thereby to the Ultimate, the Divine. Faith finds embodiment in life and in symbol. The nature of symbols and their relation both to life and faith are discussed. Symbols mediate meaning and experience, and converge on the Real unless they are debased into objects, concepts and indices: thus degraded they can become walls of division and source of conflict. "Religion is life's symbolic celebration", not denial to others of life and its fullness.

This volume, then is a prayer for sensitivity and openness, for deep insight into the mystery of ordinary things and daily life, and for the freedom and gladness of faith that blossoms beyond verbalism and display of power.

Samuel Rayan

The Dialectic of Faith and Unfaith

By faith I mean openness to the Divine. But what is the Divine? Strictly, the question itself needs to be called in question. For it presupposes a distinction between *what* the Divine is (essence) and the fact that the Divine is (existence). To attribute such a distinction to the Divine is to negate It, which already shows the Divine is unspeakable. Every attempt to speak It in concepts founders and ends up in contradiction. If, for instance, you qualify It the eternal, the immutable, the almighty and the all-holy, you mark It off as opposed to the temporal, the mutable, the weak, and the profane. But how can you know the eternal except through the temporal, the immutable except through the mutable, the almighty except through the weak, the all-holy except through the profane? If, on the contrary, following the Upanishads, you place the Divine beyond all dualities you will be setting up but one more duality, namely, the duality between the world of dualities and what is beyond.

If the Divine defies all defining, it is because It is not a thing among things. It is, in truth, no-thing, no-one, no-where and no-when. It is the unutterable abyss of no-thingness which can only be encountered or experienced. The Divine is like what light is to things lighted up. What we see are things lighted up; light itself remains unseen, though not unexperienced. In like manner, though the Divine is not a thing among things, a person among persons, we do encounter It in things, in persons, in the community of men and women, in history. The Divine is the depth-dimension of the world we live in and the world we are.

The Divine presents itself to us either as a gift or as a challenge. As a gift in all experiences of beauty, love and joy where our inmost being reaches out to its highest possibilities

Here we are on the borderland where the human impinges on the Divine. We are taken hold of by the Divine in such wise that we are no longer our own masters but bonded to It in body and soul. This is no esoteric experience accessible only to the initiated few, but something that forms part of the very fabric of our day to day human existence. What mediates the Divine may be the glory of sunrise and sunset, the mysterious calm and profundity of the ocean, the majesty and the grandeur of mountains, the dance of life and cosmic regeneration, the harmony between the infinitely small and the infinitely big, the sensuous explosion of beauty in dance, music and poesy, the birth and maturing of a love between man and woman, between man and man, the intoxicating togetherness of shared destiny, the flowering of a hope into joy, and the presence of persons who have explored the frontiers of Being, and more than anything else, the gift of existence itself.

The self-announcing of the Divine occurs also in the form of a challenge addressed to us to fight hate, violence, injustice, exploitation and every form of human bondage. It compels us to make an option against the forces of death and dissolution at work in us and in society at large. Whoever harkens to the challenge is bound to live in creative tension between the fracturedness of human existence here and now and the hoped for plenitude of the future. If the Divine as gift calls for wonder, thankfulness, surrender, adoration and celebration, the Divine as challenge calls for hope, for responsibility for the future of humankind and nature its home, and for prophetic action. Faith as openness to the Divine involves a wide spectrum of human responses ranging from contemplation to creative-transformative action.

Like the Divine, faith too defies conceptualization. It can, if at all, be expressed only in symbols which, unlike concepts, are multidimensional in meaning. Now, of all symbols the most adequate, in the present context, is the concrete living out of faith on the part of the believer. (It may seem strange to us moderns that everyday life can also be symbolic. But to our forbears everything – rivers and forests and mountains and earth and sun and moon and stars – was reality and symbol in one. For them the whole of reality was shot through with the Divine.) In faith lived, the Ineffable becomes speech.

Faith also finds authentic expression in the symbolic language of dance, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, drama, and poetic chant. History shows a primordial affinity between faith and art. Understandably. For, both spring up from the inmost core of the human where feeling and thinking and willing and loving fuse into one indissoluble unity. Besides, each in its own way is a revelation of the Divine. More than anything else, the symbolic bodying forth of faith in art has the capacity to bind humans into a community and, beyond it, into communion with the universe as a whole.

Faith, which is originally an encounter and an experience, in course of time congeals into creed, cult, and law, and thus becomes organized religion. The transition is inevitable, even necessary. But it carries with it the possibility that faith may degenerate into its opposite, atheism. It is not claimed that organized religion is atheism pure and simple. Despite institutionalization, elements of genuine faith may persist in the religious life of people. Hence the ambivalence of religion as a historical reality.

The alienation of faith to unfaith assumes diverse forms. One is *reification* whereby the mystery of the Divine is translated into manageable concepts. The goal is power born of knowledge. Just as humans use science to gain power over the forces of nature, so too they use theology to master the Divine. But what is to try to *master* the Divine but to deny It? No wonder the heyday of theology in the history of Christianity saw also the peak of christian atheism.

Ideologization is another way faith degenerates into unfaith. That is, the original promptings of the Divine are so interpreted as to legitimize and promote the interests of the privileged classes or castes. An example is the belief current among the Jews of Jesus' time that wealth was a sign of divine favour, which had for its corollary that poverty and misery was the just punishment for sin. The belief came in handy for the rich who could use it as a cover-up for exploitation and a means to transform their vices into virtues. Similarly, many Christians today use the Pauline concept of the equality of all humans in *Christ Jesus* to pre-empt any struggle against inequality in real life. Thus the Divine that necessarily beckons

us to shake off all shackles and march forward to ever more humane existence is tamed and broken in by religion so that it would from now on serve as the watch-god and watch-dog of the status quo.

Genuine faith sustains itself by listening to the saving and creative word of the Divine. But where the primal bond of listening is severed the Divine itself becomes inconvenient and embarrassing. Add to this the legitimate concern of the Elders of the believing community to safeguard what had already been revealed from possible spurious revelations. The way out was *the closure of the Canon*, which, when resorted to, implies the Divine has uttered Its last word and, having thus rendered Itself superfluous, has left the scene for good. With that the way was clear for the teaching authority to step into the shoes of the departed Divine and interpret the "deposit of faith" for all generations to come. The quarantining of the Divine was what led to the crusades, the witch-hunting, the burning of heretics and the Inquisition of the christian Middle Ages.

The estrangement of faith can occur also *at the level of symbolic expression*. This happens when symbols used embody not the original encounter with the Divine but a distorted interpretation of it. A case in point is the eucharistic celebration. Its roots go back not so much to any last supper Jesus may have had with his disciples as to the many times he sat at table with publicans and sinners in anticipation of the meal of the end-time "when people will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Reign of God". Jesus' meals with social outcasts was a prophetic gesture of radical NO to a torn, fragmented society and, as such, was an invitation to action. But this whole thrust was lost sight of when, as a result of the reinterpretation of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, the Eucharist was transformed into a sacrificial ritual, meant to make present an event of the past rather than to anticipate a future hoped for.

Religious law is yet another instance of the alienation of faith. To confine myself to the Christian tradition, true faith knows only one law, that of love. But with the canonical silencing of the Divine, the teaching authority could project its own will as divine will and promulgate it as valid for all times

and places. Thus came into being a plethora of laws and by-laws and further laws on the interpretation of laws, all of which fenced in the human spirit and smothered its spontaneous self-creation. Thus faith itself became an instrument of repression.

Drawing upon the Christian tradition, I have shown how faith, when institutionalized into religion, breeds forms of atheism. This holds true also of other religions. Not that institutionalization in itself is something wrong. What is wrong is the kind of institutionalisation that is shaped by ideas and beliefs and interests alien to the original experience of the Divine. Be that as it may, no recovery of faith is possible without a *critical transcending of religion* as it exists today. Here transcending is to be understood in the dialectical sense, meaning the negation of what is spurious and obsolete and the preservation of what is positive with a view to realizing it on a higher plane.

In the light of these reflections we can distinguish three types of atheism. The first is the atheism of those believers who replace the ineffable mystery of the Divine with a plastic, manageable God whom they can dissect, analyse and pigeon-hole into clear and distinct ideas, a God who can be spoken to but would never speak back, who connives at your not being your brother's keeper, who dispenses his bounties in proportion as they are paid for. The second type of atheism is of those who deny the God of alienated religion along with the obsolete creed, cult and culture he presides over, and that in the name of genuine faith as openness to the Divine. The third is represented by those who deny the God of estranged religion *as well as* the mystery of the Divine itself and arrogantly fold back upon the finitude of their own selves.

Jesus of Nazareth was an atheist of the second category. That explains why he was put to death! And where do we stand?

The Challenge of Atheism

Any serious thinker with concern for humanity will admit that atheism as an ideology influences at least one-third of the world's population.⁵ No one can condemn outright such an ideology which sustains so many people and so many nations and which constitutes the hope of so many of the oppressed and the exploited. It is essential, therefore, that we Christians meet the challenge of atheism in a positive way.

Christians are disturbed and feel threatened when they meet atheists. But let us not forget that when we confront ourselves with atheism, we are actually inquiring about the overall destiny of our generation as a whole. For this reason it must be clear from the very beginning that this confrontation of atheism in no way expresses only a specific Christian concern. The entire spiritual state of man today enters into the purview of our study. Whether the Christian troubles himself about it or not, the theme of atheism concerns all equally. As long as the Christian seeks to present a strong and vital testimony of his faith, he must know that the world of which he is a part is influenced by an atheistic climate of which he must unsentimentally take notice.

It is highly important that Christians must guard themselves against merely defaming atheism with a blunt, propagandistic stance. Many see in atheism only an error, the most dangerous error in history; they find its roots in moral deviation, and their prime concern is to proclaim its condemnation. This is indeed not an encouraging encounter with atheism. If we are to understand atheism in its right perspective we have to quit the approach of condemnation. Giulio Girardi brings out this point succinctly:

Since man is fundamentally orientated towards truth and authentic values, it is to be expected that, for the atheist

himself, the meaning of atheism consists more in the truths which it involves than in the errors in which it finds expression; more in the real values which it affirms than in those it denies. To understand atheism means, therefore, to ask what are the truths which the atheist intends to affirm and the values to which he intends to adhere when he denies God¹.

This does not mean, however, that atheism can be reduced to the rejection of a deformed image of God and of religion, as done by some Christians. They reach a paradoxical conclusion that the atheistic denial is directed at a falsely conceived God, and therefore atheism is not in fact error, but truth. This approach is as distorted as that of condemnation. What is needed on the part of the believer is an acute and balanced power of discrimination, equidistant from either a condemnation or an acceptance. Atheism may not be reduced either to its errors or to its truths. It results from both.

Take, for example, Marx's atheism. Those not well acquainted with Marx believe that the founder of Marxism was a militant atheist who considered the extermination of religion and, in particular, of Christianity one of his major tasks. This is not true. Marx, of course, was an atheist. It is to be noted here, however, that his atheism is quite different from the classical atheism of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which are 'political' and 'scientist' in nature². Marx's atheism was neither a purely methodological one, nor merely a skeptical one. Nor does it seem correct to say that his atheism was an historical accident rather than an essential feature of Marxian *weltanschauung*. Marx's atheism is distinctly dogmatic, in the sense that Marx always denied decidedly and uncompromisingly the existence of a divine being, and this denial is one of the major cornerstones of Marx's outlook. Marx, however, was far from ascribing to the anti-religious fight the importance which it has, for example, in the eyes of contemporary Communists. He looked on religion as a consequence of a more basic evil, the evil of a society in which man "has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again"³. As Marx saw it, religion in general and Christianity in particular were in *extremis*, if not already dead.

Marx's atheism is essentially humanistic. It starts not

from a negation, but from an affirmation. It affirms the autonomy of man and it involves as a consequence the rejection of every attempt to rob man of his creative power. It concentrates our feelings, our thoughts and our actions on humanity. This aspect of humanism found in Marx's atheism can be elucidated in these words of Erich Fromm:

The problem today is not so much whether God is dead, the problem is whether man is dead. Man, not physically at this moment - although that is threatened too - but spiritually. Whether man has not become and is becoming more an automaton, which will eventually leave him completely empty and without vitality. The humanism in its various forms is united in its determination that man should not die⁴.

The vacuum created by the elimination of God in classical atheism has now been filled by humanity. Humanity has been substituted for God.

Marx's atheism is not pessimistic in nature. It tends on the contrary to be optimistic. This is because it is motivated largely by man's self-assertion. The modern secular man is an autonomous man. He believes that there is no higher being than man himself, so man must create his own values, set his own standards and goals, and work out his own salvation. There is nothing transcending man's own powers and intelligence, so he cannot look for any support from beyond himself. He suspects that faith in God would mean the weakening of his own sense of responsibility and finds that God begins to appear as his rival. Too long men have been subject to God or to gods, and only as they have learned to take matters into their own hands have they made any advance. So we are told that man cannot really be free to order his world and to build a better future unless God is deposed and men assume complete responsibility. Man has got rid of God in order to regain possession of the human greatness which, as it seems to him, is being unwarrantably withheld by another. By discarding God he has overthrown an obstacle in order to gain his freedom. Proudhon, the Robinson Crusoe of Socialism, calls this position 'anti-theism'⁵. It is this anti-theism that we find in Marxism. We can summarize Marx's atheism, which is anti-theism in content, in these words of Milan Machovec:

What is the deepest meaning of atheistic Marxism? Certainly not the mere negation of the idea of 'God', for no mere negation can fill men with deep and enduring enthusiasm. Nor the mere abolition of hunger, need, exploitation. Those were and unfortunately still are the primary concrete tasks in some countries. But they will be solved one day, and what then? The ultimate meaning of Marxism is not politics or the cult of power, for that too has to be abolished. Nor did Marx want to turn all men into economists, quite the opposite. By the predominantly economic character of his greatest works Marx aimed at freeing men from economic cares. The enduring positive ideal and meaning of Marxist teaching is the fully authentic human life, the free human personality, or rather the 'message' that we must seek real ways of attaining the humanist ideals by scientific analysis and patiently overcome any, not just the capitalistic, form of human self-alienation⁶.

If we were to judge Marx's atheism solely on the basis of Marxist propaganda, the picture would be just as poor as would be a judgement on religious consciousness based on attendance figures at religious services. Marx's atheism is striving for a revolutionary worldview, which is not dependent on its formal rejection of religion. Marx is trying to restore to people a purpose in life and to give the whole struggle of humankind a higher meaning. We cannot completely ignore this effort, to the extent that it is directed at the progress of humanity. This reminds us that the church must be ready to witness to the lordship of Christ by co-operating with men of goodwill of all religious and non-religious groups who are genuinely concerned to seek better ways of living and working.

From the church's point of view, atheism has always been regarded as a negative phenomenon. Anyone who did not believe in a particular religious faith was called an atheist. This was the general view in the medieval and modern ages of intolerance when freedom of opinion did not exist. At the time of Enlightenment Thomas Paine defended himself against this kind of logic: "If I do not believe as you believe, that only proves that you do not believe as I believe, that is all."⁷ Atheism does not primarily mean to believe in nothing at all, but to believe in a way which is not that of religion. Modern

Marxists can say the same thing in defence of their own form of belief. To recognize that fact in a sober and critical way and to discuss the matters at issue belong also to the church's encounter with atheists. But it is a pity that the appropriate critical relation toward atheism has been uncritically expanded into a kind of negativism. It has been the practice of the church to summarize atheism as something inhuman, absolutely perverted and even almost demonic. So for centuries the atheist has been regarded as someone basically irresponsible and untrustworthy, even immoral. Atheism itself has consequently been viewed in a juridical way as a sacrilege, a transgression, something which should be resisted with utmost retaliation. As a Christian community we have to recognize and acknowledge the relativity of atheism. Jan Lochman in his thought-provoking book *Church in a Marxist Society* explains this idea in its historical, psychological and theological aspects⁸.

The Greeks designated as atheists not only those declared deniers of God and the materialists but also those who in the name of another faith separated themselves from the established religion. Socrates is an example to this. He was accused of atheism by his antagonist, Meletus, but by sheer logic alone this great teacher demonstrated the falseness of Meletus' charges. However he was executed on the charge that he led the young people astray. Many a Christian martyr encountered the battle cry, "Down with the atheists". Even in Christianity itself we find the tendency to call those who differ from orthodox faith atheists. It is worthwhile, as Lochman suggests, "to remember this lesson of our historical orientation and resist that inquisition and crusade spirit precisely when we meet those who think differently from us, especially in our encounters with atheists"⁹.

Atheism is a dialectical phase of life. "I believe; help my unbelief!"¹⁰ This situation is significant. Doubt is an integral part of living faith. As Roger Garaudy stated: "The depth of faith in a believer depends upon the force of the atheist he bears in himself and defends against all idolatory"¹¹. If we rightly understand this psychological relativity, we will not be easily tempted to consider the atheistic possibility as something totally alien to us, as a curse which only drives and threatens

other men. Hear what Martin Buber said: "The atheist staring from his attic window is often nearer to God than the believer caught up in his own false image of God". In one of his novels, *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky makes Bishop Tihon say to Stavrogin: "The complete atheist stands on the penultimate step to most perfect faith (he may or may not take a further step)"¹². This has been one of the most profound statements that has ever been made on the subject of atheism. All men, the pious and worldly, here find themselves together in the same situation.

The theological relativity of atheism directs us to the foundations of the life of faith. The beginning and ground of human existence does not lie within us, but lies instead in the reality which is the basis for faith — in the reality, action, and history of God. The essence of Christianity is founded not by faith but by the work of God — more exactly, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus this essence of faith cannot in any way be destroyed by unfaith. Both faith and unfaith are not the matter itself, but instead they are response to it. The Gospel remains sovereign over faith and unfaith. Therefore the task of the church is not to denounce the atheists but to declare the Gospel to them.

The spiritual situation of the world, especially in those societies hitherto nominally Christian, shows that not just the atheists, but all modern men are conditioned by an atheistic atmosphere, and that evolution of science and technology is a permanent assault on the traditional structure of the church and everything we call religion. From the perspective of theology as we understand it, all human divisions, systems, social and political institutions, all philosophical thoughts, find themselves on the same level, on the side of the created world in its corruption and promise. As Czech theologian Josef Hromádka, the pioneer of Marxist-Christian dialogue, puts it:

The dividing line runs not between communists and non-communists. It runs between the Lord of glory and mercy, on the one hand, and human sinners (whether communists or non-communists) on the other. Theologically, it is all wrong to see the main line of division between the Christian ideology and civilization, on the one hand, and the non-Christian *weltanschauung* on the other¹³.

This is something which we must always remember. As Hromadka pointed out in a different context:

What matters is whether a Christian in the purity of his faith and his understanding of man joins the struggle and demonstrates by the audacity of his faith, by his love for his neighbour, and his optimism about the future, that he is not just the passive object of history or even of the new society, but rather the co-author and co-architect of the new order¹⁴.

At the same time it is our responsibility to examine ourselves, to allow atheism and modern science and technology in general to challenge our idols and fetishes, our superstition and backwardness, and our lazy attitude toward the real events taking place in our society.

To be a Christian is not just "to serve God", but it is also a dynamic social ethic, a service to mankind. We may not agree with Feuerbach when he says theology is anthropology; but we have to admit that there is certainly much anthropology in theology. Although Christianity is directed to the 'beyond', it nevertheless must influence our actions in the realm of the 'here below'. It must give a deeper meaning to our bond with the world and with history. Solidarity with the agonies and problems of modern man becomes the sacrament of God's serving presence in the midst of the world¹⁵. Christians cannot escape into a false mysticism or an illusory transcendentalism, with the affairs and needs of their brothers and sisters left 'here below'.

It is true that Christians do look beyond the terrible realities of the 'here below', but this is not to evade them or to render them illusory. Rather, by loving and serving men, they prepare for the Lord's *parousia* in the very act of love for their brothers and sisters. As Christians, we are always human beings, and human dignity and endeavours must always be of supreme importance. In this sense there can be no radical division between believer and atheist. Atheism challenges Christians for a vision of man rooted more deeply in reality. It exhorts Christians to act out the implications of man made in the image of God who has become incarnate. It reminds the church of the real concern of the Gospel. The true renun-

ciation of ecclesiastical privileges, a giving up of the gifts of the church to the world, therefore, correspond to the central movement of the Gospel, the path of God to man, i.e., the saving renunciation of the Son of God on behalf of the world¹⁶.

Poulose Mar Poulose

Foot Notes

- 1 Giulio Girardi, *Marxism and Christianity*, trans. by Kevin Traynor (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1968), pp.2f
- 2 For a discussion of classical atheism and its difference from Marxist atheism, see, Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. by Edith M. Riley (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950). Also see, Roger Garaudy, *Marxism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Rene Hague (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp.106ff
- 3 Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction", *On Religion*, Introduction by Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 41
- 4 Erich Fromm, "A Global Philosophy of Man", *Humanist*, July/August, 1966, p. 122
- 5 Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, op.cit. pp. 6f. Also see, E. H. Carr, *Studies in Revolution* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), pp. 38ff
- 6 Milan Machovec, "Atheism and Christianity-Their Function of Mutual Challenge", *Concurrence*, Vol. I, no.3, 1969.
- 7 Cited by Jaroslav Krejci, "A New Model of Scientific Atheism", *Concurrence*, Vol. I, no. 1, 1969, p.96
- 8 Cf. Jan Lochman, *Church in a Marxist Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 158ff
- 9 Lochman, op. cit. p.159
- 10 Mark 9:24
- 11 Roger Garaudy, "Christian-Marxist Dialogue", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Vol IV, Spring 1967, p. 222. For a discussion of the interrelatedness of belief and unbelief, and its psychological implications, see Paul W. Pruyser, *Between Belief and Unbelief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
- 12 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Possessed* (New York: The Modern Library, 1963), p. 698
- 13 Josef L. Hromadka, *Theology Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, MCMLVII), p.67
- 14 Josef L. Hromadka, *Impact of History on Theology*, trans. by Monika and Benjamin Page (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, 1970), p. 83
- 15 Cf. Matthew 25:36-40
- 16 Cf. Philipians 2

Women Live their Faith in a Sexist Church

I often ask myself why I continue to remain in a sexist Church.

Women are denied the right of being themselves. Women have no place in decision-making. Men with their emphasis on "hyper-rationality, objectivity, aggressivity, the possession of dominating and manipulating attitudes towards persons and the environment"¹ exercise power not only in the Church, but in the family, society and the workplace. Women have been conditioned to be totally submissive by the Church's patriarchal teaching on the roles of men and women in the family and society.

Where can I find a message of liberation?

As I read the Scripture, Isaiah has this analogy, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?" (49:15). We see here the feminine quality of God. God suckles the son at her breast². For me, a depiction of God as mother is revealing. It removes all barriers of sexism. I am made to feel on par with man.

As I listen to the call of Jeremiah in Is 49:1b, what touches me is that the Lord called Jeremiah when he was in his mother's womb. The womb or the uterus of the woman is sacred. It is a meeting place for God and human beings. It is a place where all prophets were chosen for a mission. It is a temple where God communicates and fashions his own. It is a place where the foetus is nourished, strengthened by its mother and where the foetus shares all the experiences of its mother. Elizabeth told Mary at her Visitation, "for behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy". How beautiful faith is, how noble woman is!

Again in Is. 42:14b, we see the image of God the mother, "I will cry out like a woman in travail". John 16:21 states, "when a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come, but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world". Do we not see this facet of God our Mother who suffers labour pains to give birth to her children?³ In Hosea 11:2 we hear Yahweh saying, "the more I called them, the more they went from me, they kept sacrificing to the Baals" and again, "how can I give you up, O E'phraim!... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender... I will not execute my fierce anger... for I am God and not man..." I see the pastoral care and anguish that Yahweh goes through which is similar to the birth pangs that a mother undergoes. But alas! language, thought and feeling in my church are so male-dominated that women feel excluded.

Woman's subjection to man makes her his total slave in a sexist Church. She is voiceless. In our Church we see women dancing to the tune of the clergy. Are we ever given a chance to express our opinions, or even listened to? I feel really weak and helpless in our sexist church. In order to re-affirm this helplessness, Mary is held up as our Model. She is made to be docile, simple and humble. We are made to realise this in many of our hymns about Mary. e.g.

1. "O maiden, will you be the mother of the Saviour?
Your God has chosen you to give the world his Son.
His power will be your shield, his Spirit come upon you."
And Mary bowed and said: "God's will be done!"
- Ref: And Mary said: Yes, and Mary said: Yes,
And Mary said: Yes, when she knew
that it was the will of God.
2. "No cradle will be his, but just a simple manger.
A helpless little babe, from Herod's wrath he'll run.
And in a foreign land, long years he'll have to linger."
And Mary bowed and said: "God's will be done!"
3. "And soon the day will come when enemies will round him,
And nail him to a tree, your sinless, spotless one.
The price of mankind's ransom will heavy fall upon him."
And Mary bowed and said: "God's will be done!"

Mary is depicted in this hymn as a woman who had no backbone of her own. The first verse spells coercion. That God chose Mary is the highlight. But for me that was a decision Mary made with her eyes open. Mary is a revolutionary of her day. The child born to her is out of wedlock. She gave us our Redeemer. She was not bound by what others would say of her.

The second verse gives a feeling of helplessness and hence her passive "yes" to God's will. For me, the whole incident of Herod's quest for power is his insecurity. He will not accept Jesus. In a situation like this, Mary aware of her internal strength decides not to battle with Herod. She uses her creative powers and decides to channelize her energy in protecting her Son from danger.

The third verse instils fear which might have led Mary to say "yes" to her fate. But for me, Mary is an intuitive mother, aware of what will befall her Son. She is near him, she is close to him, nay, she is in him upholding him, supporting him. She is seen standing at the foot of the Cross. She does not fear the mob. She does not sink into her loneliness. She is there standing with her Son to the bitter end. For me this is faith. It is taking a decision and standing by this decision, no matter if I am left friendless, or if it is contrary to what the rest of society thinks.

Leonilla Ageira states: "Presently the structure of the Church has not only deprived women from equal participation by giving them inferior positions but also a small group of clergy have accepted the bondage of being superior to a large group of people who form the body of Christ. As long as this situation persists there can never be communion in practice in the Church, for there cannot be communion between unequals."⁴ This state of inequality is clearly seen in the church. Looking at the roles we are called to play, it is usually men who are Vice-Presidents of the Parish Councils, the President being the Parish Priest. Today, women too are called to play a role in these councils. Will a day ever come when a woman will be appointed President or Vice President of such councils? Rather, a woman is called to listen and obey. I hate this church who will neither allow nor encourage women to take initiative.

Yet my faith tells me I must make my presence felt, and I will make my presence felt, if only I should find my place in Parish Bodies, I will not give up.

In its present structure, women are on the periphery. Satyashodak, a group of Catholic women who work to bring about equality and justice for women in the family, society, church, the workplace, defines ministry as "a mobilization of the gifts of the spirit in the service of the community"⁵. In other words, Ministry implies tapping the internal resources which lie within us. If the leaders of the church had vision, they could draw forth the gifts which women do possess. Then women could pour out their rich gifts for teaching and communicating the faith and it would have been welcomed. Liturgical, catechetical and social ministries would spring out from them. We could have had a church with artists, cantors, commentators, counsellors, baptisers, ministers in charge of the sick and the dying, and those for the care of the young and children, and the handicapped. What a rich variety of gifts would keep flowing! Alas! our sexist church will not allow us to bloom and grow. Neither will it allow us to feel on par with men. Nor will it allow the community of God to benefit from women's wisdom.

Exclusion is not the only humiliation which women suffer. As women are breaking the culture of silence, we are coming to learn that various degrees of physical violence ranging from pinches to bloody wounds are the experience of many Indian Catholic women in the family. A priest recently related the anecdote of a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. The old lady told him that for everyone of these fifty years, she had been beaten by her husband but her patience and subjection had paid off and she could now celebrate her golden anniversary together with him. Is this what our faith teaches us, is this a good catholic marriage? I would prefer the approach of the priest who told the 73 year old woman, "if your husband beats you today, don't cry, just walk out of the house". She did as she was told. Later she reported, "my husband came running behind me". He told her, "I will never beat you again". It is time that our faith taught us that women are not to be beaten, broken, raped and insulted. We need to

get the strength from our faith to challenge and resist such totally inhuman behaviour.

Why is it that, in questions of sexual morality, the weight of responsibility is put much more on women than on men, even in our church which claims to have one law for men and women? Why is it that men who are pillars of the church and society stoop so low as to make comments and slighting jokes? Why do men blame women stating, "she asked for it; she invited it; she wore provocative clothes deliberately to turn us men on"? Women are aware that these are hollow excuses. Women are not going any longer to tolerate sexual abuse from men, or anything that goes against dignity. This is what faith is. I will not accept it because I have a dignity and faith in my person.

Women's rights movements have organised social boycott of rapists, gone to court asking for redefinition of rape. Mrs. Anjali Kanitkar, Lecturer of Nirmala Niketan, College of Social Work, gives an account of an ex-student of the College who worked as an activist of Kashtakari Sanghatana, among the tribals in Dahanu of Thane District for politicisation and conscientisation. She was gang raped by alleged CPI(M) activists, having been abducted from a tribal hamlet where she had gone to conduct a meeting along with her co-workers. All the groups engaged in similar work, in Bombay and elsewhere, were appalled by this news. One of the immediate actions taken was a protest morcha/rally held at Jawhar in Thane District where the incident had taken place. Organisations working in rural and urban areas joined together to demand in one voice that the assaulters be produced before the police immediately and the political party concerned take strict and immediate action against these members.

The next week professional social workers in Bombay came together to lodge a similar protest and express solidarity with the victim who was also a member of their profession. A memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister and the Chief Secretary of Maharashtra, demanding justice. Consequently, the rapists were arrested and later released on bail. The case will take its own course now.

Besides, women are working towards bringing changes in laws regarding sexual harassment, molestation, rape etc. Determined efforts are made by women who collectively show their strength in solidarity to take a joint pledge to fight the ugly monster — rape. Did we not notice this strength manifested on March 8, 1990 at Cama Hall on International Women's Day when over 15 organisations and hundreds of individual women "portrayed rape as a socio-political problem afflicting the country and not as individual aberrations?"⁶ The decade old campaign on rape has not only led to an amendment in the rape law which now did not presume, in custodial cases, the women to be guilty but has brought before the public eyes the necessity to see the rapist and not the victim as a criminal. Women's rights organisations will be holding a National Conference on Rape in April 1990 in Bombay for evolving strategies for struggle against rape.

Despite humiliations, oppression, hardships, women are living their faith with true dignity. Dr. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala writes: "I wish the women in the Catholic Church would form a union and stage a walk-out... I am tired of a worship that fails to recognise my existence.. To be a woman in the church means to be invisible... We have no say in the formulation of Canon Law..., our spirituality does not shape doctrine. And theology based on our God experience is dismissed as "feminist nonsense", yet, it is we mothers who pass on the faith to our children and inspire vocations... We are the ones who silently care for our churches and priests. We are the parishioners who organise fetes and jumble sales for some worthy cause. Yes, we may have no place among the twelve who have their feet washed on Maundy Thursday, but we know the reality of answering the Master's call to Service."⁷

This faith teaches me that to tolerate always and be accommodating is the path of the coward. Self abnegation without an understanding of my own dignity and self-respect as a person leads to humiliating servility. Flattery of those in power is not expected from one who is hungering for justice and truth. It is my faith in Christ and in His Word and His Example which gives me a sense of self-worth. As a woman, the mission which I am given is that God has "made my mouth like a sharp

sword" to proclaim his message of equality between the sexes. "He has made me a polished arrow" to reach my target of finding solutions to problems which take away women's dignity.

If I then stay in this Church, I stay in it to bring changes within the Church as well as in the family, society and the workplace!!!

Flavia D'Souza

Foot Notes

- 1 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine; the biblical imagery of God as female*, New York: Crossroads, 1988, p.106
- 2 Ideas have been taken from Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine; the biblical imagery of God as female*, New York: Crossroads, 1988, p.106
- 3 *Ibid*
- 4 Benedicta Leonilla Ageira, *Communion: role of the Woman*, pp.1, Paper, Bangalore, Centre for Non-Formal and Continuing Education.
- 5 Minutes of the Satyashodak Meeting held on 20/7/89.
- 6 Times of India, March 9,1990.
- 7 Dr. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, February 16, 1990.

God Knows why You Women Weep and Weeps with You

As I write this personal exploration of what it means to be a woman in the Indian church and society today, a controversy of some proportion is raging in our nation — the question of the Christian personal laws. The laws relating to Christians — on marriage, divorce and succession — have remained unchanged since colonial times. Some of them are more than 150 years old.

There is no question at all that it was Christian women of all denominations, who fanned the recent concern to bring about changes in the laws. This is because the prevailing laws are not only archaic and out-moded but because they are grossly unjust to women and have been the cause for untold suffering to thousands of women. Individual case studies of Christian women who had the courage to challenge the laws can be given, to substantiate this claim. What is fresh in our memory is the case of Mary Roy, a woman who fought a relentless battle up to the Supreme Court of India, demanding a share of the ancestral property which would almost entirely go to her brother, by law. Mary Roy's courageous act led to a change in the antiquated law.

Sonia Zachariah is another name now in the news. Two years after marriage, her husband deserted her, leaving her with a small girl child. He went away to Africa with a missionary movement from where he wrote to Sonia saying that God had spoken to him and told him that he must marry another (English) woman ! He asked forgiveness of Sonia and with that cut all links with her. Ten years after this event — after ten years of struggle to feed herself and her child — Sonia has challenged the Constitutional validity of a Christian law that

denies her the right to be divorced from her husband, who had so heartlessly deserted her.

Shyamala's name too became national news, when two years ago, she and her sister were helped to escape a brutally abusive marriage. Shyamala's husband who battered her and treated her in an absolutely inhuman way, "married" her younger sister, on the pretext that Shyamala was barren. He then began to ill-treat the younger sister as well. After 7 years of patient endurance (she clung all those years to a flickering hope that he would change), Shyamala smuggled out a letter asking for help for herself and her sister—when she realised that his threats to murder them were genuine. They were released by the urgent action of their brother and the People's Union for Civil Liberties. Shyamala now is waging a struggle in court, asking for a divorce as well as maintenance for the two children her sister had borne her husband. He has said that he is quite willing to give a divorce, as he wants to marry again (!) but has been trying to avoid the question of maintenance.

In these, and many more cases, the women concerned have been ably supported by women's organisations. In their demand for change in the personal laws Christian women have the solidarity of the secular women's movement in India, which has offered unconditional support to women of the minority groups in their struggle. Owing to the efforts of women, the churches have been pressurised to act and now a new Bill has been framed and is being discussed by the churches to be introduced in the Parliament. In a national level meeting in January this year organised by Christian Women's organisations represented by All India Council of Christian Women and YWCA, Bombay with the secular women's movement represented by the Women's Centre in Bombay, women of all faiths, particularly Christian women of all denominations, criticized the Bill and sent in suggestions for amendment.

In spite of this committed involvement of women, both in the eyes of the Church *and* of the government, all ecclesial authority lies in the hands of a few male hierarchs whose *word* will be the final determining factor on all matters relating to the minority christian community. Statements presenting a different point of view, signed by hundreds of Christian women, pour-

ing in from all over the country are counted for nothing. The latest is a statement from Orthodox Christian Women from Kerala calling for a liberalisation of the grounds for divorce¹. The hierarchs will have the last word, and they carry on with amazing insensitivity discussions on changes in the laws, that will not disturb the status quo too much. They are of course willing to give a few concessions here and there. Women are either totally excluded from this debate or are included as tokens with little or no power to bring about radical changes they had initially called for.

I give this rather long and detailed example to show that indeed it is not very easy to be a christian woman in India today. At almost every stage we see the wisdom and commitment of women undermined by "the voice of the church" dictating to women on what is "right" and what is "not acceptable". Two years ago women of one of the Lutheran churches were telling us that, as is normal in all Lutheran congregations, the women offered to read the Holy Scriptures during the worship service. They were arbitrarily told by the pastor that he would not permit it! The ordination of a woman, Rev. Sr. Betty Paul, to priesthood in the Church of South India, Madras Diocese, was stayed by an order of the Civil Court due to a writ filed by a small handful of men who claim ordination of women to be unbiblical! The Civil Court had to lift the ban on her performing all the functions of a priest. Women's faith and faithfulness is severely tested at every point.

**The women's movement in India –
a moment of power**

What has been at the source of my spiritual energy and has therefore sustained me in my faith has been the women's movement in India. The women's movement challenged me out of my political complacency and dogmatism to recognise the need for women to organise themselves *as women* so as to ensure that the transformation process will be full and complete. It made me realise that no existing political grouping took cognisance of the very specific forms of oppression women experience. It challenged me to recognise the triple jeopardy that my sisters from the rural and urban poor sections experience. It led me into a totally new world which demanded a paradigmatic shift in my ideological and faith formulations.

The stories of the suffering of women, and their commitment and courage not to stay bent over any longer but to stand upright and demand a place under the sun, have strengthened me.

Sharadamma is a woman who has inspired me. She is an uneducated woman who had with great effort educated her daughter, and later was to experience the joy of seeing her secure a job in the government and see her married to another government employee. A year later Sharadamma's daughter had a son. Two years later she was murdered by her husband. The family had been unable to continue submitting to her husband's demands for "more dowry". The case was registered as a suicide in spite of all the circumstantial evidence to show that it was a murder. Sharadamma never managed to secure justice. She ran from pillar to post working out the evidence to prove that it was a murder. After a few years of chasing after elusive justice, she decided to commit herself to working *for* and *with* other women. In conversation she told me, "The pain will always be there, I will not give up my struggle. But, I will now work with women and try to ease their pain. No more women must die for the sake of dowry". Sharadamma and many other women in the movement have transformed my life.

God weeps with you

Another dowry death; another incident of rape of a young woman in a police station; violence against women at the time of a communal riot; a young Dalit woman is humiliated and driven to commit suicide; a woman is murdered because she does not give buttermilk to her husband when he demands it; a young woman dies on the operation table in a family planning camp; the body of a girl child is found in a rubbish heap, torn to pieces by dogs; sex determination tests and abortion of female foetuses are on the increase — these are real life events with which we as women live every day. Every time I read one more report of such an event in the newspaper I am reminded of what a feminist theologian (Elizabeth Bettenhausen from USA), said once at a meeting when she was asked to theologically respond to the violence against women. She said, "Weep no more, my sisters. God knows why you weep and She weeps

with you!" This is what sustains us women — the consciousness that we have the compassionate, caring, over-shadowing presence of a liberator God, who weeps with us.

The Bible – a patriarchal text

Women are not able to directly draw power from the Bible because "Certain texts of the Bible can be used in the argument against women's struggle for liberation not only because they are patriarchally misinterpreted but because they *are* patriarchal texts and therefore can serve to legitimate women's sub-ordinate role and secondary status in a patriarchal Church"². Such a patriarchalization has taken place in all religions and women of all faiths do find it difficult to draw inspiration from their religious texts to sustain them in the struggle.

Describing the Latin American experience which in some ways is similar to that of all nations in the South, Elsa Tamez writes that the Bible for the poor has "become the simple text that speaks of a loving, just, liberating God who accompanies the poor in their suffering and their struggle through human history"³. But she goes on to say that women

find clear, explicit cases of the marginalization or segregation of women in several passages of both the Old and the New Testaments. There are, then, differences between reading the Bible from the point of view of the poor and reading it from women's perspective. The poor find that the Word reaffirms in a clear and direct way that God is with them in their fight for life. Women who live in poverty, however, even when they are aware that the strength of the Holy Spirit is on their side, do not know how to confront the texts that openly segregate them⁴.

So on the one hand the problem for women is that the Bible is in itself androcentric written in very patriarchal times, but then the very sexist attitudes prevailing in our societies make the situation all the more difficult. As Elsa puts it, "To the extent that there is an easy correspondence between two cultures that marginalise women, it becomes even harder to discuss the biblical texts that reaffirm women's marginality"⁵.

It is this commonality of patriarchal constraints that prevailed when the Scriptures were written and what prevails

now, that seems to legitimize the "use" of the Scriptures to "put women down". Biblical literalism takes its most pungent form in our societies only when it comes to the question of women's participation.

Elsa sees what women are consciously confronting us:

First, from the effects that these antiwomen biblical readings have produced on so many women and men who have internalized, as sacred natural law, the inferiority of women. Second, there is an inherent difficulty in interpreting texts that not only legitimate but also legislate the marginalization of women. Third, and this is mainly for Protestants, the problem is the principle of biblical authority as it is traditionally perceived⁶.

However, for Indian christian women and increasingly among our sisters of other faiths, it is becoming important to reclaim our faith heritage because of the now familiar expression "our heritage is our power"⁷. There is also a growing consciousness, among our hindu sisters particularly, that women must reclaim liberative strands in their faith heritage too, before they slip fully into the hands of reactionary elements which would politicise religion for their own vested interests. The need to wrest religion from fundamentalist forces cannot be minimised in a context like India where religious communalists and politically right wing forces are wreaking havoc on our integrity as a nation. Women have realised this and have gone back to the Bible and to other religious scriptures to discover liberational strands in them.

The Bible – source of inspiration

The Bible, has also been the resource in which women have found meaning for their struggles.

The Bible plays a vital role in the lives of women and in our struggle for liberation, because the Bible itself is a book about life and liberation. This liberation is rooted in God's action in history, particularly in the Christ-event. The Gospels restore to women our human dignity as persons loved and cherished by God⁸.

A reinterpretation of the scriptures and an attempt to "mine deeper into it, rejecting all the patriarchal crusts"⁹ to find liberative stands, has engaged women all over the world.

What has sustained my faith as a woman in a context of gross sexism has been among other things my own journey into the feminist theology movement. I had to go back to the Bible to discover the root of my power, the challenge that gives me meaning to live in a context of gross injustice to women. However, without first learning from feminist theologians, I discovered that anyway, the only way I could re-read the Bible was with the "hermeneutics of suspicion"! It was therefore easy for me to recognise why feminist theologians say that

A critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation therefore seeks to develop a critical dialectical mode of biblical interpretation that can do justice to women's experiences of the Bible as a thoroughly patriarchal book written in androcentric language as well as to women's experience of the Bible as a source of empowerment and vision in our struggles for liberation. Such a hermeneutics has to subject biblical texts to a dialectical process of critical readings and feminist evaluations. In order to do so it insists that the litmus test for invoking scripture as the Word of God must be whether or not biblical texts and traditions seek to end relations of domination and exploitation¹⁰.

After recognising the need for a critical re-reading of Biblical texts, it was just a next step to discover that out of the struggles of Indian women for justice and human dignity it is possible to speak of hermeneutical principles from our own experience. This journey to discover our own roots as Indian Christian women, has without a doubt, been an important source of spiritual energy for me.

Moments of despair - moments of hope

Yet, it has not been easy to live and work in a patriarchal Church enduring its constant insensitivity and most often unconscious actions to undermine women's creativity and contributions; watching its helpless fear to speak out and take uncompromising stands against all forms of oppression; suffering the deep hurt of its stubborn refusal to make its language about God and humanity more inclusive; experiencing distorted Biblical teachings and one-sided interpretations of the Word of God — all this and many more indignities have to be borne if one keeps up one's resolve to stay in the church and play a transforming role.

I have drawn strength from the power of women in the Bible—the power of Hagar and of Sarah (Genesis) of Shiprah, of Puah and of Miriam (Exodus); of Vashti and of Esther (Esther); of Abigail (1 Sam); of Mahlah, of Milcah, of Tirzah, of Noah and of Hoglah (Numbers); of Naomi and of Ruth (Ruth); of Hannah (1 Sam) and of all the other women named and unnamed in Biblical history, has sustained me.

Sharadamma, Mary, Sonia, Shyamala and all women in the women's movement give me my reason for continuing, with great faith, the struggle for justice. In their lives, in the determined organised power of women, in the rainbow colours of the women's movement which draws together women of all classes, of all faiths, of various ideological backgrounds, and in the relentless struggle of women who transcend their own pain and tears to see that justice is restored—I see the re-emergence of the feminine energy (Shakti) which breaks out of patriarchal silences to blow over the land... and in this I see and know my God, and She keeps my faith burning.

All India Council of Christian Women,
Unit of the National Council of
Churches in India

Aruna Gnanadason

Foot Notes

1. A Resolution to this effect was passed by the first ever Orthodox Christian Women's Gathering, organised in Trivandrum from 7-10 February. Over 100 women from all the major Orthodox Church traditions participated in this meeting, called by the All India Council of Christian Women Unit of the National Council of Churches in India and the Kerala Council of Churches.
2. Schussler Fiorenza Elizabeth Bread Not Stone. The challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Beacon Press, Boston 1984, p. xii
3. Tamez Elsa "Women's Rereading of the Bible" in With Passion and Compassion Third World Women doing Theology ed. Fabella Virginia and Oduyoye Mercy Amba, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1988, p. 173.
4. Ibid p. 174
5. Ibid p. 175
6. Ibid p. 175-176
7. Chicago Judy uses this expression in "The Dinner Party: a Symbol of our Heritage", Doubleday Anchor Books, N. Y., 1979.
8. Final Document: Intercontinental Women's Conference Oaxtapec, Mexico, Dec. 1-6, 1986. Printed in With Passion and Compassion p. 186.
9. Ibid p. 187
10. Shussler Fiorenza Elisabeth, op cit, p. xiii

The Universe of Faith and the Pluriverse of Symbols

Reflections on the Symbols of Faith

1. Introduction

Reflections on the symbols of faith may sound provocative, since the realms of symbol and of faith operate best when there is immediacy, not reflection. Moreover reflection never comes alone; it inevitably brings reason (= reasoning) along with it which is the last thing that faith and symbols seem to tolerate. However what is meant is less provocative, more evocative, for the purpose of these reflections is to show how reason can be of help in the realm of faith and its symbolic expressions.

The philosophic (= critical?) type tends to give priority to reason and reflection: the theological (= the believing?) type to faith and symbol. Such water-tight divisions between philosophy and theology not being of much use today it will be best to reflect on the meaning of faith and its relation to symbol and thus illustrate in and through this process how and where reason comes into the picture.

If we begin with the example of a symphony we can see that a symphony comes to life in a world where faith, symbol and reason blend together, each in a different manner, to produce a harmonious whole. In a symphony not only are there different instruments that bring forth a variety of sounds; these sounds lend themselves to a process from which a unity emerges. In its turn this unity unfolds a theme that expresses the *form* and *shape* of the symphony. The listeners of the symphony do well by listening to the whole and by hearing the theme develop step by step rather than by analysing the individual sounds issuing

from the multitude of musical instruments. By listening (repeatedly) to the whole piece one gets an idea of its form and theme; from there one can proceed to analyse the various 'parts' of the musical piece and see how each contributes to the whole. One can then even go on to study the specific sounds of the different instruments and discover their contribution to the total effect. In such a situation it might be worthwhile to examine, even analyse, the 'notes' of the symphony in order to get acquainted with the 'physics' as it were of the musical work.

Clearly the starting-point here is a world that is given, namely, a world of openness, opening of the instruments to both the music and the players, openness of the individual to the contribution of the whole, openness of the audience to the whole performance, etc. It is in such a context that enjoyment and analyses of the musical work have their proper place. The *experience* of a musical work is enhanced not only by repeated hearings but also by analyses of notes, structures and themes. It is however the experience of the symphony as a whole that forms the background of the analyses. There is first the experience of the whole, however vague it might be, from where one begins and to which one returns; it is from there that one proceeds to analyse and reflect and it is to this whole that one returns after the analysis is completed. The analyses enrich our understanding of the symphony. By themselves they would not be in a position to contribute to the enjoyment of the piece; they would not make much sense if the experience of the whole were totally missing. It is in the context of the experience of the musical work alone that analyses and reflections make sense.

Over and above that, we have to remember that in a work of art a variety of worlds fuse together: the worlds of the composer, of the performers and of the audience (to say nothing of the producers of musical instruments, the publishers of musical books, the builders of music halls etc.) with the overarching aim of bringing the musical code to life. For a musical performance to be successful there has to be a harmonious blending of all these worlds. Such blending is possible in a world of openness.

The realization of a symphony then 'takes place' in a universe of faith. That is to say, a performance is possible

only where almost everything is presupposed and taken for granted. It is a universe that is given, not made or manipulated wholly. In such a universe symbols are at home, and reason and reflection function like the walls and the roof to protect the symbols from the heat of the rationalist and the rain and cold of the sceptic and the agnostic. If reason were not to accept the universe of the given, no performance would take place because a performance has to assume so much that cannot be proved, so much that is not amenable to human manipulation.

Now how does faith enter into the picture at all? Are we not bringing faith into the discussion without much rhyme or reason? To answer this it would greatly help to make ourselves aware of the realm and function of faith. If we take the trouble to reflect on the nature of faith and the role it plays in our lives it will become clear that only in a universe of faith can the pluriverse of symbols (to modify a phrase of R. Panikkar's) flourish.

Without even our being aware of it our lives assume the proper functioning of the whole universe as the classic chapter 38 from the Book of Job brilliantly illustrates. Openness of every kind and in everything is presupposed so that the universe can go its way. *Our lives are built on such a foundation.*

"Who is this obscuring my designs

with his empty-headed words?

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Tell me since you are so well-informed!

Who decided the dimensions of it, do you know?

Or who stretched the measuring line across it?

What supports its pillars at their bases?

Who laid its cornerstone

when all the stars of the morning were singing with joy,

and all the Sons of God in chorus were chanting praise?

Who pent up the sea behind closed doors

when it leapt tumultuous out of the womb,

when I wrapped it in a robe of mist

and made black clouds its swaddling bands;

When I marked the bounds it was not to cross

and made it fast with a bolted gate?...

Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning
 or sent the dawn to its post...?
 Have you journeyed all the way to the sources of the sea,
 or walked where the abyss is deepest?
 Have you been shown the gates of Death
 or met the janitors of Shadowland?
 Have you an inkling of the extent of the earth?
 Tell me all about it if you have!
 Which is the way to the home of the light,
 and where does darkness live?...
 Have you ever visited the place where the snow is kept,
 or seen where the hail is stored up,...
 From which direction does the lightning fork
 when it scatters sparks over the earth?
 Who carves a channel for the downpour,
 and hacks a way for the rolling thunder,...?
 Has the rain a father?
 Who begets the dewdrops?...
 Can you fasten the harness of the Pleiades,
 or untie Orion's bands?
 Can you guide the morning star season by season
 and show the Bear and its cubs which way to go?
 Have you grasped the celestial laws?
 Could you make their writ run on the earth?...
 Will lightning flashes come at your command
 and answer, 'Here we are?' (Job 38)

2. Faith as fundamental openness

Faith is openness, to the earth and the heavens, to the sun and the stars, to the sacred and the secular, to the seas, rivers and oceans, to the mountains and the valleys, to the forests and the deserts, to the heat, the cold and the rain, to the gentle breeze and the stormy winds, to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field; openness to life and death, to the past and the future, to men, women and children, to happiness and suffering, to health and sickness, to love and understanding and the lack of it, to friend and foe, to young and old, to the beautiful and the ugly, to the strong and the weak, to the lovable and the difficult, to new ideas and old, to one's God and to the God of one's neighbour.

Faith is openness to the worlds of prose and poetry, of history and geography, of politics and economics, of art and science, of music and myths, of astrology and astronomy, of Shruti and Smriti.

Briefly and more importantly, faith is primordially openness to the Divine in the cosmic and the human.

But what does openness mean? Does it imply agreement, understanding or acceptance? Because the soil is open to the seed the seed can germinate and grow into a plant. Because one is open to a certain person, the seed of friendship can germinate and grow into a plant called love. Because the plant of love is open to the beloved, it can bring forth fruits and flowers of selflessness and sacrifice in the service of the beloved. Openness therefore perhaps presupposes some understanding but surely acceptance. However it does not mean agreement.

2.1 Faith as a constitutive dimension of the human person

For R. Panikkar faith is a constitutive dimension of the human person and he is right about this. What he means is that no one can be (i. e., become) human without faith. Faith constitutes a human being, makes him human. Without faith it is not possible to be human. To develop one's humanity one needs faith. It is through faith that one becomes human. How? Why?

A human being is not like a box or a book, of which it can be said at some stage or the other that they are finished products. The making of a box is completed some time or the other so that there comes a time when it can be asserted that the box is ready and can be made use of. A book may take years of writing but there comes a moment when one can say that it is completed. Sooner or later it is published and can then be read.

This is not how and what a human being is. *He is always on the way to being human.* There is no stage when one can say with confidence that the process of being human has been completed and that a person has reached fulfilment.

There is then an infinite capacity in a human being for becoming human. Faith is the source of this infinite capacity. Indeed the infinite capacity is but the expression of his funda-

mental openness, that is, openness in his very foundations. This infinite openness is basically openness to the Infinite Mystery. That is the reason why being open to the cosmic and the human is in effect being open to the Ultimate.

Traditionally faith has been usually taken to mean something mysterious. For when it comes to matters of faith, not seldom our explanation suddenly ends in a *cul-de-sac*: we cannot account for this, we say, this is our faith! The implication is that we cannot "explain" this, this is a matter of faith, we can accept it only in faith, faith alone can rescue us here. In this sense faith has come to be understood as something inexplicable which however has to be "believed" (that is, accepted on faith!) because it has been revealed. Human means by themselves are incapable of reaching the dimension of faith. Only Revelation can lift us to that level.

But even such an understanding of faith presupposes faith as fundamental openness because we would not be able to believe in Revelation if we were not fundamentally open to it. This is true not only in the case of Revelation. To accept anything we have to be open to it. We have to be open to each other to be able to accept each other, we have to be open to nature in order to be one with it, we have to be open to a culture in order to appreciate it, we have to be open to music in order to enjoy it, we have to be open to poetry (and new ideas!) in order to understand them, we have to be open to the past in order to digest it, we have to be open to the present to become aware of it, we have to be open to the future so that we are not afraid of it, we have to be open to sickness and old age so that our spirit does not age and become sick etc.

We speak of *fundamental* openness because we cannot be human and cannot grow as human beings without our very self being fundamentally open. Furthermore the reason why this fundamental openness is called faith is this: our traditional way of looking at faith (either as belief in or assent to God's revelation) not only presupposes such an understanding of faith, traditional understanding of faith is in fact derivative since faith as fundamental openness is primordial. That is to say, it is because our very being is open to something/someone beyond us that we can believe in or give assent to God's revelation.

Faith as fundamental openness is the structure in the human person which responds, corresponds to the Divine. This means that our response to the Divine is always and only through faith. If faith is fundamental openness and if fundamental openness is the structure in and through which the human person responds to the Divine in the cosmic and the human, then the implication is that whenever we are open to anything and any one we are in fact responding to the Divine.

Dwelling a little longer here might help bring out the implications more explicitly. Our knowing and understanding of the human and the cosmic is always partial, never exhaustive. We can never assert that we exhaustively know the human or the cosmic. It is here that our openness is operative. Because we are open, we do not stop and assert that what we know about them is all there is to be known about them. *Our openness with regard to things and persons implies that we believe that there is always more than what we see and understand.*

But the moment we stop being open, we stop believing that things and persons are more than what we see and understand. In that instant we begin to reify the cosmic and the human, to reduce everything and everyone to objects that can merely be measured and weighed, seen and felt, heard and described. The element of mystery disappears. Such a world holds no surprises and no challenges for us—only monotony and calculation, information and description, all vying with each other to offer incense to the phantom of mechanistic precision.

3. The pluriverse of symbols

On the other hand, openness to the cosmic and the human implies a universe of freshness and surprises comprising the worlds of love and hate, of truthfulness and falsehood, of music and noise, of poetry and prose, of art and the artificial, of smiles and treachery, of joy and sorrow, of care and unconcern, of expectation and disappointment.

Thus because the universe of faith, as fundamental openness, is a constitutive dimension of the human, the human finds himself in a universe of symbols symbolizing the Mystery that is the source and origin of the universe—the one and

only centre around which everyone and everything revolves in order to be and grow. But the world of objects is not a universe, for objects that are understood as mere objects are monads, unrelated, separate, alien. However in the universe of faith where relation and relationship are of the essence there is an absolute centre where the relatives meet. Fundamental openness is basically openness to this centre in and through which everything and everyone becomes related through a relation to a relative.

Openness to the centre of the universe of faith is always openness to the pluriverse of symbols for the simple reason that the former manifests itself only in and through the latter. For not only is our access to the centre in and through the world of symbols; the world of symbols itself would not remain a world of symbols if it did not reveal and lead back to the centre of the universe of faith. It would become a world of unrelated objects. For symbols to remain and function as symbols it is necessary that they transport us to the symbolized centre of faith.

This will become clearer if we concentrate on the meaning of symbol in our context. Symbols are best understood vis-à-vis objects. What we call objects are things that are confined to a spatio-material world; they do not have a 'surplus of meaning'. In a world like this we can know more about the objects but, if for example we have measured and weighed an object, there is an end to what we can know about its measurement and weight. Objects consist only of such characteristics which when known are known exhaustively, as it were. But symbols are more than objects, we can know symbols, not only about them. They display a surplus of meaning and their meaningfulness is inexhaustible. Though we may grasp the significance, say, of a warm welcome, it is never grasped exhaustively. The reason is that symbols and symbolic gestures not only reveal (at least to some extent) the centre of their Mystery but they carry us ever deeper into it.

A tree seen as an object is a complex of describable and measurable characteristics but a tree experienced as a symbol reveals a depth-dimension which is irreducible to the describable and measurable characteristics of the spatio-material world. But in a symbol the describable and measurable charac-

teristics function as revealers of something more. Like glass they show through; through them we have an insight into the symbolized reality.

A symbol then is not a mere pointer, like a sign which stands for something but itself is not that something. A symbol 'contains' as it were the symbolized reality. A smile 'contains' the joy or happiness. The smile 'symbolizes' the joy and happiness. Symbolizing means expressing through itself. The essence of a smile is to express not itself but the joy which is the source of the smile. That is why a smile cannot be reduced to the mere movement of the facial muscles. To do this would be to reify the smile. But when the smile leads to an insight into the joy which is displayed in the smile, the smile becomes a symbol of the joy; it symbolizes the joy that gave birth to the smile in the first place. The example of the smile makes it obvious that whereas the symbolized reality (= the joy) expresses itself in the smile (= the symbol), the smile is by no means identical with the joy. The smile and the joy are not one and the same thing. It is in and through the smile that the joy expresses itself.

Realities like joy cannot be created by us. They are given to us. They are like the light on the moon depending totally on the light of the sun. (In the theistic scheme of things, obviously God is the sun.) It is because of this that symbols are capable of leading us to the centre of the faith-universe. But where such access is absent, symbols have been transformed into objects.

Because they belong to the realm of the 'given', realities like joy and happiness, peace and tranquillity, justice and harmony, love and loyalty, selflessness and self-sacrifice are accessible to us only through symbols and symbolic gestures.

In the universe of faith everything is symbolic, symbolic of either the 'presence' or the 'absence' of the Ultimate Mystery. It is the believer who has the eyes to see and the ears to hear that comes in touch with the symbolized Mystery — in the symbols. For him trees are not just trees, and flowers are more than flowers; suffering is not just the absence of joy and death is not the cessation of life. All of them speak to him of the presence or absence of the Ultimate Mystery.

In this connection one might ask, is this not a mere projection of the believing mind? Besides, will not each believer (the Buddhist, the Christian, the Hindu etc.) see the world in his own way? Whose would be right, whose world would be real? The believers would all agree with regard to the spatio-material characteristics of the world. It is not so that one believer holds that the sun is at such and such a distance from the earth and another believes that the distance is either more or less than what the first believer holds. On the contrary they would all be agreed about the spatio-material characteristics. However because each sees the significance of the spatio-material world from his specific experience each would probably assign a different significance to it. Furthermore in matters of faith and belief it is never a question of who is right but whether the belief leads to an experience of what it promises.

But still, one might insist, is there not here a projection of the believing mind when it claims to perceive the meaningfulness of the universe, over and above the spatio-material characteristics? This is a matter of semantics. Meaningfulness is not a new meaning (if we restrict the meaning of meaning to the spatio-material characteristics); it is the motivating force that goes beyond the motivating force of possessiveness and power. Meaningfulness is that mystery which makes us selfless and committed, positive, optimistic and full of hope. It is a motive-force which seems farthest removed from any kind of projection since no 'earthly' profit is to be gained in this case. Symbols communicate such inspiring motive-force.

4. The culture of faith

Thus where faith is operative one discovers a world of symbols but where faith is absent one is saddled with nothing more than objects. Faith, however, like being human, is a process, not a point. Faith as constitutive dimension has to be actuated, actualized, nourished, cultivated and cared for. The fundamental openness has to be filled in, filled up, fulfilled. Doing this is an on-going process.

How does one go about cultivating, nurturing faith, knowing full well that faith is after all a matter of grace, of being graced? For the believer, not only faith but our whole being,

our being-in-the-world, our world and our universe, are all, without exception, a matter of grace. This does not however dispense us from opening our eyes and perceiving the world and perhaps discovering there the absence of the Ultimate. Precisely because it is a world which has been graced, can we discover that at many times and in many places it has been and is still being disgraced! This, for the believer, is the challenge: to learn to rediscover the symbolic character of the world. Is this not the basic task of theology: to help cultivate our fundamental openness by looking at and speaking of the human and the cosmic as the foreground on the background of the Divine?

Now how can one concretely go about this task? What must one do or not do? Cultivating faith is like cultivating friendship, more of an art than a science; hence more of a question of being than doing, of being aware rather than acting according to definite rules.

The usual way we have been going about this in the (western) Christian tradition is that of concentrating on doctrines and dogmas. We reflect on them and reason out. We try to 'understand' and assimilate them so that they can influence and shape us. Thus it has been more of an intellectual approach and so it is not surprising that interest in matters of faith has been restricted to theologians, priests and perhaps sisters. The masses, the *holi polloi* (apart from exceptions) have not been able to afford this luxury.

The Indian tradition of 'the flute and the dance' is not only more down-to-earth; it is accessible to all and sundry because it is attractive. It is the approach of symbol and metaphor. Religious education in the Indian tradition has taken place down the centuries through the metaphors of religious music and poetry, and the symbolic gestures of sacred dance. The flute of Krishna and the dance of Shiva have been active as symbols of faith in our country from times immemorial. They have not only instructed our peoples in their religious traditions; what is more they have inspired them to lead selfless lives more powerfully and more effectively than any sermon or theological treatise could ever hope to achieve.

Music, poetry and dance point by their very nature beyond themselves. It is not the graspable, describable, mea-

surable characteristics that they lead to. They display a world of possibilities where the human spirit discovers itself, a place where it can dwell and be at home. That is why at such moments when we occupy ourselves with religious music or poetry or dance we are 'touched' and transformed, we have an insight into our lives and into Reality.

Does this sound far-fetched? In that case it might be useful to recall that no liturgy can ever dispense with music, poetry and symbolic gestures. And this by no means is accidental. Liturgy is to be understood as a feast—a feast wherein the human spirit opens itself up, blossoms and flowers. The explanation for this is that in our day to day lives we are fully caught up within, completely entangled in a spatio-material world; so thoroughly are we prisoners of our self-seeking and possessiveness. This fact constrains us from opening ourselves to realms that transcend the spatio-material world. But music, poetry and dance transport us to a kingdom where self-seeking and possessiveness are not active. Here the human spirit can more freely breathe the air of freedom and experience the wide expanses of fundamental openness. Here symbols and metaphors come alive: bread is transformed into the Bread of Life and wine turns into the cup of salvation. Here we realize that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, like a sower, like leaven, like a treasure hidden in a field; that to be the greatest one must be the lowest, the greater and higher serving the humbler and lowlier; that in God's family there is no male or female, jew or gentile, rich or poor.

It should now be clear why we began with the example of a symphony. Liturgy is a kind of symphony, a work of art where music, poetry and dance form a drama. Liturgy is a sort of cult, a culture—where the spirit of faith is cultivated and symbols and metaphors are its fruits and flowers. For liturgy is the prime act of the ecclesial community, in which the community becomes community, and the faithful become faithful. This is due to the fact that openness is evoked, cultivated, nourished and cherished. Here the symbols of faith are represented, performed and proclaimed. And the essence of all this symbolic activity is: openness to God in the Highest by openness to the cosmic and the human!

Faith and Symbols

The Flute and the Chakra, the Cross and the Crescent

Faith is an experience. It is a personal response to the call of the Ultimate. The response has to be shown basically in moral behaviour. In this process the symbols, while useful, seem superfluous. The Ultimate and one's experience of it are after all ineffable, beyond all name and form. Are we not called to demythologize all religious symbols in an age of reason and enlightenment? Such purification seems all the more urgent when we see the power that symbols, particularly religious symbols, seem to have over people. Just as some people are ready to die for them and even seek out martyrdom as something praiseworthy, others seem as ready to persecute or even kill in order to affirm or protect their symbols. On the other hand one cannot deny that religious symbols bring people together, animate and inspire them. They evoke emotion and commitment and provoke action. Some would say therefore that an abstract faith that claims to forego religious symbols is illusory. The response of faith is not a mere intellectual affair. Faith finds embodiment in life. The symbols are necessary. One could use or abuse them. One cannot do without them.

How can we prevent religious symbols from being abused, while at the same time encouraging the undoubted positive benefits they seem to have for religious practice in community? Can religious symbols unite and enrich rather than divide religious believers? It will certainly be helpful to understand better their role in religion and life, before we can suggest possible strategies for their creative use. My approach is explanatory, not apologetic. It is not my purpose here to defend the use and relevance of symbols. I am just pointing to their complex functions.

Symbolic mediation in religion

When we look at religion phenomenologically we see it as a system of symbols¹, which could be words, narratives, gestures, objects, persons or actions. The integral religious symbol is the ritual. It is the symbolic action of a community². It embraces within itself all sorts of symbols. An example would make this clear. In the Eucharist, a Christian group of people celebrate their togetherness as a community. They express this not only by coming together but by symbolically expressing it in a common meal which they share together. The meal becomes the symbol not of any community, but of a Christian community because they repeat what Christ did at his last supper with his disciples. This reference is conveyed through a narrative that recounts what Christ did. If the reference is to a cosmic event that is placed at the origins or at the end of time the narrative will take the form of a myth, which does not claim to be a historical record, but expresses the meaning of what happened. Eating itself is a gesture. The priest represents Christ as the head of the community. Bread and wine are consumed and they sacramentalize (symbolize) the body and blood of Christ, that become food.

A closer look at this symbolic action reveals to us a number of characteristics of religious symbols¹. They mediate transcendence. The Eucharist is not simply a celebration of the community. It is a participation of the community in the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection which is the source of new life for it. The celebration refers back to a foundational event — the last supper — of which it is a re-enactment. The transcendent reality is revealed not in an abstract discourse, but in a historical event of the life of the community, both at the beginning and in successive celebrations. The symbolic action has also a reference to life. The symbolic celebration of a community will be meaningless if the community is not continuously created through actual sharing of love and life. The symbolic action is particular to a community in the context of a particular historical tradition. The symbols belong to the community. An individual cannot manipulate them as he or she likes. A different community may convey similar meanings through other symbolic actions that are expressive of its own historical tradition. Most religions have similar sacrificial and communion rituals. Such

symbols always refer to a foundational event that constitutes the community. But the remembrance of that event is not made for its own sake but precisely in order to actualize it so that it can continue to constitute the community⁴. This ongoing process is manifested in the life of the community, thus establishing a dialectic between celebration and life. Religion is for life: it is life's symbolic celebration.

When the narrative that is part of ritual celebration gets written down it is Scripture. Scripture is not primarily a discourse, but the recorded memory of an experience. In the course of the life of the community sapiential and prophetic texts may be added to the scripture. But they are all ordained to explain and actualize in life the narrative. They are not directly the proclamation of the Word of God. They are the expression and proclamation of God experienced in the community's or in an individual's (prophet's) life but in relation to the community. A prophecy has no meaning except in the context of a community to which it is proclaimed.

Rituals not only express but also structure community life. The community affirms its identity and its relation to the transcendent through the ritual⁵. These two functions find expression in two sorts of rituals: rituals of passage and rituals of transcendence⁶. The former celebrate important moments in the life of the individual in relation to a community: birth, marriage, reconciliation, death. The latter, like praise, thanksgiving and sacrifice, relate primarily to the Ultimate that is seen both as the origin and goal of the community: e.g., the Eucharist.

The nature of symbol

Even a brief analysis as the preceding one shows how central symbolic action is to religion and faith. Without it faith would be disembodied, without roots in humanity and community. Looking again at the phenomena one can try to understand the nature of symbol⁷. Religious symbols point to the Transcendent or Ultimate or to anything that is beyond what can be apprehended by the senses. They are not known somehow in themselves, but in terms of their impact on our experience. So it is in and through the experience that we reach out to these spiritual realities. This very process of knowing structures the symbols that mediate the knowledge. The symbols

belong to the level of the senses, but they point to something that lies beyond. The fact that they have their origin in the experience of that reality makes them homologous with the reality in some way without really being adequate to it.

Without attempting here an elaborate theory of symbol, I would like to point to a few characteristics that we have to understand for the sake of our argument. While the relation between the symbol and the thing symbolized is in some way homologous (warmth expresses love), in a *sign* it is merely arbitrary (as words referring to things) and in *index* it is merely associative, though the association has a basis in reality (smoke indicates fire). A symbol is basically polysemous: fire can symbolize love as well as anger. Welcome can be warm in a cold climate like Europe and cool in a hot climate like India. One reason for this polysemous character is the double level of meaning that a symbol has. A banquet symbolizes fellow feeling in a community. A sacred banquet affirms this community as the common fellowship with the divinity. A symbol is determined from both sides. Just as it is conditioned by the reality that it symbolizes, it is also determined by the cultural and human context of the symbolizers, because it arises out of their experience. A symbol reveals the symbolizer as much as the symbolized⁸.

Besides pointing to the Transcendent, the religious symbols have two other functions: they are socially and psychologically integrative. A common meal makes people not only experience and affirm community; it also builds it up. At the same time if the community is structured in some way, say hierarchically, that will be manifested in the celebration in many open or hidden ways⁹. Similarly a common meal may cater to the needs for self-expression, belongingness, security, acceptance etc. This can be at two levels: in relation to the divine and in relation to the other. These social and psychological functions are also spelt out in symbolic form. A greeting of peace expresses also community. The imposition of hands expresses communication of power besides concern and acceptance. In a psychological context the symbols can convey more than conscious meaning, evoking the depths of the personal and collective unconscious, of which the symbolizers themselves are not aware¹⁰.

Because of the multiplicity of functions and conditionings of the religious symbols, they need to be interpreted to

discover what they mean in a particular occasion. Such interpretation will have to take into account the historical and cultural tradition, the spiritual, experiential and revelatory context and the personal and social situation and needs¹¹. Since religious rituals refer back to and re-enact a primordial experience, the symbols too will have to be understood in that historical tradition. Since the symbols convey not merely knowledge, but experience, some one who has not had the experience and is looking at it from outside the tradition may not be able to interpret them authentically. I shall argue that ignoring or overemphasizing any one of these various aspects is at the root of abuse of religion and of inter-religious conflicts.

Symbols and pluralism

Because symbolic expression is limited and not exhaustive, symbols of the same reality can be many. We can see this in a poet who is struggling to give expression to an experience through a multiplicity of metaphors. In the religious sphere we have the tradition of invoking the names of God in a litany. The multiplicity can come from various sources: from cultural differences, from different historical traditions as well as occasions of similar experience, from the expressive creativity of the person or the group.

Pluralism becomes a problem when there are truth claims: one considers one's symbols as true and those of others as false. Can we say that a particular symbol is true? People with a positivistic turn of mind would reject all religious symbols as untrue. Believers, of course, will assert their truth value. Some propose the theory of "symbolic realism"¹². The realities that we know through symbols can be reached only in that way. Therefore they are true. But at the same time they are not true in the same sense as a scientific proposition that can be verified through observation and experiment. An African theologian speaks of relative truth with reference to the spirit world with which many African peoples are concerned¹³.

Religious symbols are true in so far as the reality they point to can really be known or experienced through that symbol. But the symbols are not adequate representations of the reality. Therefore the reality itself is much more than what we grasp of it through symbol. In India one speaks of God

as *nirguna* (beyond qualities), beyond name and form. In Christianity there has always been an apophatic tradition that considered God as the unknowable. Symbols, while true, can be limited. Therefore true symbols do not exclude the possibility of other true symbols. At this level the principle of contradiction, valid at the level of rational concepts and logic, does not apply.

Though the symbols that mediate an experience may be limited, the experience and the commitment provoked by it can be absolute. The symbols are only mediations. The experience is of the reality that one reaches out to in and through the symbols. One can commit oneself to that reality in an absolute way. One of the problems with religious symbols is that they tend to share the absolute quality both of the reality and of the commitment they mediate. If we look only at the communicational aspect of symbol this problem may not seem important. But if we consider the experiential aspect of symbol then we can appreciate this subtle interplay between the relative and the absolute.

A call to Dialogue

As long as a community is closed in on itself the mystery mediated by symbol opens out vertically rather than horizontally. But when the group effectively faces the reality of the other believers, then a process of reflection starts that opens many breaches in the boundary walls surrounding the group. In Hinduism, we see this process starting in the Upanishads and continuing throughout its history. There is a perception of the deep unity of all Being and therefore a relativization of all symbols. But this relativization of symbols does not lead to their denial, but to their integration in a totality.

Tensions between various groups were not absent in its history: they have even been violent. But there has always been an underlying sense of unity, though this unity is not simply pluralistic, but structured around Hinduism. It has sought to integrate the positive values of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity. This may be a reason why it has not felt the need to develop a theology of religions¹⁴. In the Christian tradition we see such an opening in the sapiential movement, which takes shape particularly when the Jews are forced to live in exile and encounter other peoples. Yahweh and Sophia embrace the whole

universe and all the peoples in their divine plan, though a particular people are chosen as carriers of this divine plan in history. The Church is rediscovering this vocation to the ministry of unification only in recent years and so is promoting inter-religious dialogue. Islam too has had its movement of openness to other religions. As a Muslim commentator has said recently: Muslims believe that non-Muslims possess what Islam calls *din al-filah*, or natural religion. This is original religion which Muslim defines as Islam. The historical religions are outgrowths of *din al-filah*, containing within them different amounts or degrees of it¹⁵. Such movements of openness lead to an acceptance of the legitimacy of the symbols of other religious traditions.

Building boundaries

Religions often become sources of conflict, not for strictly religious reasons, but for economic and political ones¹⁶. Religion is brought in as a legitimating force. Two groups of people who are struggling for economic advantage or political power see religion as the source of their group identity. People who share the same beliefs are presumed to have the same economic and/or political interests. Religion is certainly a strong cementing force within a group, where people are still religious, because the source of the identity it provides transcends the historical and human sphere. People who pursue power can manipulate this force of religion to their own advantage. But even in such cases it is also a fact that religions allow themselves to be so manipulated. Religions do build boundaries around themselves that divide the 'faithful' from the 'infidels'. They do this for religious reasons, not only for economic or political ones, though they tend to become aggressive and oppressive only when linked to the pursuit of economic or political power.

In such a conflictual situation religious symbols lose their symbolic character and become either indices or mere concepts. One does not effectively recognize the other believer either because one is dominant and wishes to dominate or because one feels vulnerable and wishes to protect one's identity and so becomes defensive. Within the religious community the symbols still keep their transcendent reference, so that the group feels that it is specially chosen and thus legitimizes either its dominance or its choice to suffer persecution. But with reference to

the 'outsider' the symbols become indices, i.e., boundary markers of identity. The socially integrative nature of the symbol gets the upper hand. Symbols can also become indices when people no longer believe meaningfully; they may never become merely social, but they point to an indeterminate Sacred corresponding to a vague popular religiosity. For example, the Cross is a symbol of self sacrifice and evokes the whole mystery of Christ, particularly his identification with the sufferings of humanity. Such a meaning has been perceived even by other religious believers. But on the flag of a Crusader, it is nothing more than the ensign of an army who see in it a licence to kill and to plunder in the name of defending Christendom. The saffron colour symbolizes the radical detachment of the sanyasi in Hindu tradition. But in the hands of the Vishva Hindu Parishad it has become the ensign of militant Hinduism. People who perceive the richness and ambiguity of their own symbol easily see the meaningfulness of the symbols of other believers too.

A different development leads to the ignoring of the distance between symbol and reality. The symbol is rationalized into a concept. The Scholastics defined truth in terms of an adequation between the knower and the known expressed in a concept and affirmed in a judgement. Such an idea of truth does not have room for symbols that are open. If a symbol is true then it must be an adequate representation. If one symbol is adequate, then other symbols of the same reality must either say the same thing or must be untrue. This is the principle of contradiction. The philosophic traditions of the East seem much more sensitive to the complex nature of symbol which reveals as much as it hides. This complexity not only allows, but seeks for other symbols to get a fuller view of reality. Symbols demand creativity and pluralism as in art and poetry. They are dialectical and dynamic, holding contraries in tension. One approaches them not in a divisive perspective of either/or, but in an integrative one of both/and. The relativity is an attribute of the symbol primarily in relation to the reality symbolized. But this relativity also makes it relative to other symbols. However it should not be understood in horizontal terms as if the symbols constitute different parts of one totality. On the contrary each symbol is a unique attempt of a community to express the reality.

Different symbols are not so much complementary as convergent, for we must remember that symbols do not just communicate knowledge, but mediate and actualize experience. Reality is one, but its symbols are not unique, though symbolizers may claim uniqueness in the light of their reading of (salvation) history.

When religious symbols are cut off from their roots in life they become alienating. The religious reality instead of making this life meaningful becomes a refuge. It caters to the psycho-social needs of the group without relation to their life and its struggles. This phenomenon can affect both the rich and the poor. The poor find in religion an escape from their misery. The rich find in it a comforting assurance that does not challenge them to change. The religious symbols as such are not responsible for this dichotomy between life and religion. But once such a dichotomy has taken place for other reasons like the powerlessness and resignation of the poor or the self satisfaction of the rich, the symbols can lend themselves to the construction of an imaginative world that acquires an autonomy of its own, unrelated to life and reality. The symbols then are no longer relevant to life.

Liberating the symbols

For an authentic human and community life the religious symbols need to be liberated. This means that they can mediate transcendence, and help integrate persons and community in view of their ongoing life and creativity. They arise out of life experience and are oriented to its transformation. They are freed from becoming mere indices or concepts, slaves to fundamentalist and communalist constraints. Symbols however do not exist by themselves. They are part of symbolic actions of communities. So the liberation of symbols means ultimately the liberation of these communities so that for them the symbolic action is really integrated in their ongoing life as a prophetic and creative moment.

An inter-religious group of people challenged by the promotion of justice and community is the ideal context for such a liberation of symbols. The commitment to justice and community will ensure that the symbolic action is relevant and meaningful, prophetic and oriented to a better human future

for all. The symbols will no longer be alienating but will arise out of life experience and lead back to richer life. In such a context the symbols themselves become free to inspire and to motivate and to mediate dynamic action. Without such a living context any attempt just to renew the symbols or symbolic actions will be a fruitless effort. There might be an aesthetic revival that will be irrelevant and alienating. The symbols will lose their dynamism and become fetishes. When religion is integrated into life, it will cease to become an object of speculation. This is the only way to avoid the reduction of symbols into concepts.

The experience of a wide inter-religious community sharing common concerns of life and values can prevent a particular religious community from becoming a ghetto and from turning its symbols into indices. In living together we see the other believers as persons and their religion as their effort to live their lives in the light of the Transcendent and not as a system to be dissected objectively and discussed. Dialogue with them becomes the mutual encounter of believers and the context for the interpretation of each other's symbols. One learns to resituate one's own symbols in the wider context of the divine plan for the world more fully revealed to us in our encounter with the other believers. Living with the others as a community betrays not only the differences, but also the unity of needs, concerns, situations and perspectives from which symbols arise. One learns to relativize one's own symbol in the very act of seeing the significance of the symbols of the others. The basic unity that calls for dialogue and common action is not only the one transcendent reality, but also its immanent presence in the life of the human community. Such an encounter will be a call, not to give up one's symbols, but to grow in religious experience.

From one point of view it would seem that we have to liberate, not so much the symbols, but the symbolizers who build walls around themselves. But once such walls come tumbling down in the light of experience then the symbols take over. Religious symbols, being communitarian and traditional, have a power and dynamism of their own. They open up dimensions of experience that one may not dream of. This opening up in its turn leads to new creativity.

Conclusion

When we look at religious symbols like the dancing God, the wheel of *dharma*, the cross and the crescent we can simply identify them as indices of the various religions. One can analyse their diversity as symbols: the cross refers to a historical event; the dancing God represents an imaginative vision; the wheel is a metaphoric indication of the moral order; the crescent is an arbitrary sign, though one could allegorize it. But when we see them as mediating other people's religious experience we can explore the possibility of reaching out to the experience of the other precisely through these symbols. We cannot really understand the other without seeking to enter into their symbols and experience them as it were from the inside. This crossing over of boundaries does not destroy one's identity but deepens it, because the symbols of the other do not have the same foundational significance as one's own. That is why inter-religious dialogue, especially when it is geared to common action for justice, inevitably raises the question of sharing worship or symbolic action¹⁷. If the stress is less on the symbols and more on the common task, sharing worship will seem less of a problem.

The liberation of the symbols will liberate the community and its creativity. Then the symbols, from whatever source they come, will be seen as enriching. They will enrich the experience of the community. It is from such experience that a new world will be born, in which the melodies of each will blend into a new harmony.

M. Amaladoss

Foot Notes

- 1 Cf. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87-125.
- 2 Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Religious Rite as Symbol", *Jeevadhara* 5 (1975) 319-328; David N. Power, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy* (New York, Pueblo, 1984)
- 3 Cf. M. Amaladoss, "Symbol and Mystery", *The Journal of Dharma* 2 (1977) 382-396.

- 4 Cf. Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester, Ellis Horwood, 1985)
- 5 Cf. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors. Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, Cornell, 1974)
- 6 For more detail, see M. Amaladoss, "Symbols in Life and Worship", *Jeevadhara* 18 (1988) 237-256.
- 7 Cf. F. W. Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols* (London, SCM, 1986); John Skorupski, *Symbol and Theory* (London, Cambridge, 1976); Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts* (New York, Crossroad, 1985); Veena Das (ed), *The Word and the World. Fantasy, Symbol and Record* (New Delhi, Sage, 1986.)
- 8 Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience* (Chicago, University of Illinois, 1986)
- 9 Cf. Emile Durkheim, *Les formes elementaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris, Presses Universitaires, 1968)
- 10 C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (London, Aldus Books, 1964).
- 11 Cf. Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston, Northwestern university, 1969)
- 12 Robert N. Bellah, "Theology and Symbolic Realism", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9 (1970)
- 13 Meinrad Hebga, *Sorcellerie et Priere de Delivrance* (Abidjan, Inades, 1982), pp. 126-139.
- 14 G. Gispert-Sauch, "Approaches of Indian Religions (Hinduism) to Other Faiths" (mss)
- 15 Haji Fadlullah Wilmot, "How Does Islam Regard Other Religions?" *The Sunday Mail* (Kuala Lumpur), 10 July 1983, p.6, cited in Thomas Michel, "Muslim Approaches to Dialogue with Christians", *Islam and the Modern Age*, Feb. 1984, pp. 37-50; See also Christian W. Troll, "The Salvation of Non-Muslims: Views of Some Eminent Muslim Religious Thinkers", *Islam and the Modern Age*, May 1983, pp. 104-114.
- 16 Bipin Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (Delhi, Vani, 1964)
- 17 See Paul Puthanangady (ed), *Sharing Worship* (Bangalore, NBCLC, 1988).

The Faith that Makes us Whole

1. Salvation and faith

Faith is what matters. Faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and raised, is what justifies and saves. This is the central message of Paul's letters especially those he sent to Christians in Rome and Galatia. It is the good news of the Gospels and of the entire New Testament. What matters is not physical descent from Abraham, nor the historical memory of any particular apostle, nor circumcision, nor the observance of the Mosaic Jewish law.

"What makes a man righteous is not obedience to the law, but faith in Jesus Christ." (Gal 2:15)

It is through faith that we receive the promised Spirit.

"The promise can only be given through faith in Jesus Christ, and it can only be given to those who have this faith." (Gal. 3:14, 22) "No one can be justified by keeping the law." (Gal 3:16)

The law was but a tutor and guardian "until Christ came and we could be justified by faith" (Gal 3:24). The law cannot save, it can only specify sin by telling us what is sinful. It is from faith that law receives its true value and point and meaning (Rom 3:20, 31; 7:7-13; Gal 3:19-22). "Christians are told by the Spirit to look to faith (and not to laws and rites) for those rewards that righteousness hopes for." (Gal 5:5)

That is why, if we are in Christ by faith, it makes no difference whether we are circumcised or not: it is immaterial whether we are claimed by this rite or that, whether we are of one caste or another. The measure of the importance of such things for us would be the measure of faith's deficiency in us.

"The justice of God comes through faith to everyone, Jew and pagan alike, who believes in Jesus Christ", and "the upright man finds life through faith", for, "God saves all who have faith"; He "justifies everyone who believes in

Jesus", and he has appointed Christ "to sacrifice his life so as to win reconciliation through faith" (Rom 3:22-26; 1:16-17).

God is one who justifies the circumcised because of their faith, and the uncircumcised through their faith. It is in faith that righteousness consists, and it is on faith that whatever fulfils the promise depends (Rom 4:13-16).

"So far, then, we have seen that, through Our Lord Jesus Christ, by faith we are judged righteous and at peace with God, since it is by faith and through Jesus that we have entered this state of grace in which we can boast about looking forward to God's glory." (Rom 5:1-2)

2. That you may believe

The Fourth Gospel was written with a view to faith. "So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name" (Jn 20:31). The many signs Jesus gave are linked every-time to the birth of faith. In Cana of Galilee Jesus "let his glory be seen" in the provision of fine and abundant wine to meet an embarrassing crisis that a poor family faced on the occasion of a wedding there; "and his disciples believed in him" (Jn 2:1-11). The event of the temple cleansing is a sign of Jesus' resurrection from the dead: the resurrection is God's act of reconstructing the Temple of Jesus' Body which the Jews had destroyed in murdering him. When Jesus rose from the dead his disciples remembered the words he had said about the destruction and the rebuilding of the sanctuary. And "during his stay in Jerusalem for the Passover, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he gave" (Jn 2:13-23). The lifting up of the Son of Man is a sign similar to the lifting up by Moses of the bronze serpent in the desert, "so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (Jn 3:14-15; cf. 12:32-35). Two signs given after leaving Judea — telling the Samaritan woman 'everything she had ever done', and curing by a word spoken from a far a nobleman's son—both issue in faith (Jn 4:18, 28-30, 39-42, 50-54). The cure of the cripple at the pool of Bethzatha is interpreted as a sign—parable of the work of the Father and the Son who raise the dead and give them life through faith.

"Whoever listens to my words and believes in the One who

sent me has eternal life...he has passed from death to life." (Jn 5:1-9, 21-26)

The miraculous feeding of five thousand men in the desert led the people to the faith-affirmation that "this really is the prophet who is to come into the world" (Jn 6:1-15). It was meant to be the sign of a deeper faith-reality, that Jesus himself is the heavenly Bread the Father gives "for the life of the world" (Jn 6:27-33, 49-51).

In chapters 7, 8 and 9 Jesus himself is presented as a sign that is contradicted and rejected. Some said, "He is a good man"; others said, "No, he is leading the people astray" (Jn 7:12; also 40-44, 45-52, cf. Lk 2:33-35). That happened during the feast of Tents in Jerusalem. "There were many people in the crowds that believed in him; they were saying 'When the Christ comes will he give more signs than this man?'" (Jn 7:31) The argument of chapter 8 is that Jews (Pharisees) refuse to believe because what Jesus speaks is the truth he learned from God, his Father, while what they follow is what they have learned from their father, the devil who was a liar and a murderer from the beginning (Jn 8:31-44). The restoration of sight to a man blind from birth is a sign to which the healed man responds with faith (Jn 9:17, 24-38), and the Jews with hardened legalism and refusal of light (Jn 9:16, 18-23, 24, 28-34, 39-41).

The theme of faith recurs in chapter 10 where the Jews asked Jesus to tell them plainly if he was the Christ. Jesus replied that he had already told them, but they would believe neither his words nor the witness of his works (Jn 10:22-26). The heart of chapter 11 is the revelation of Jesus as the resurrection and the life, which calls forth the faith-response of Martha (Jn 11:21-27) and of many Jews who saw Lazarus walk out of the grave at a word from Jesus (Jn 11:43-45). When a week later Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem the crowds who had come up for the festival greeted him as King of Israel and gave him a great reception because they had seen or heard of this sign Jesus had given when he raised Lazarus (Jn 12:12-13). The Gospel says in conclusion that "though the Jews had been present when Jesus gave so many signs, they did not believe in him ... And yet there

were many who did believe in him, even among the leading men, but they did not admit it through fear of the Pharisees" (Jn 12:37, 42).

3. Universal and cosmic

Saving faith is faith in Jesus Christ. How then is one to understand the faith of Abraham which is accorded very special theological status in Paul's writings? What is said about our faith in Jesus Christ is said also about Abraham's faith in God. Abraham's faith "was considered as justifying him". Therefore those who rely on faith are sons of Abraham. They "receive the same blessing as Abraham" who is 'the man of faith' par excellence (Gal 3:6-9; Rom 4:3). Abraham has become the ancestor of all believers, circumcised as well as uncircumcised. He "is our father in the eyes of God, in whom he puts his faith and who brings the dead to life and calls into being what does not exist" (Rom 4:11-12, 16-17). Hence our faith too will be "considered" if we believe in him who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 4:24).

That means that faith, while relating to Jesus, moves towards God and ultimately terminates in him.

"Whoever listens to my words, and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life." (Jn 5:24) "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in the one who sent me and whoever sees me, sees the one who sent me." (Jn 12:44-45) The sphere of faith is the total mystery of Jesus Christ understood in a quite radical and fundamental sense: Christ as the primordial place and medium of God's saving spirit, energy and action; the Mystery which said "before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8:58); the Christ-reality in whom, through whom and for whom all things were created and reconciled (Col 1: 15-20). The sphere of faith is universal and cosmic, wider and older than the historical Jesus-community we call the Church. That is how for Paul Abraham can become the ideal believer and the father of all the faithful. As the reality and the life of faith transcend the christian community, so it goes beyond christian creeds and formulations and all religious symbols. Jesus said,

"It is not those who say to me 'Lord, Lord', who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21; also vv. 22-23).

Faith and the Father's will are something more and deeper than prophesying or casting out demons or working miracles in God's name. The Father's will and the reality of faith are disclosed in the picture Jesus draws of the final judgment and decisive evaluation of human life and world history.

"Then the King will say . . . , 'Come, . . . take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you . . . For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink . . .'" (Mt 25:34-37).

Those thus addressed will reply with a surprised question. When did they see Jesus hungry or thirsty or naked, and feed and clothe him? They had never seen him, never known him, never heard of him. The King's answer to that honest surprise and protest will be: "in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me". And in so far as one neglected to do this to one of the least of the hungry, naked, homeless people, one neglected to do it to Jesus Christ. To take the Kingdom for our heritage is to be definitively saved. But where is the faith which we have seen is essential and vital for salvation? Jesus is showing us that authentic faith lies within the response of compassion and justice shown to victims of oppression and deprivation. It is identical with that response. That active response is faith. It puts response-able people in direct contact with Jesus Christ who is one with all the hungry, the homeless, the naked and the wretched of this earth, and all the crucified of history. And to be connected with Christ is to be related to the Kingdom and belong to God.

The faith that saves consists not in saying 'Lord, Lord', nor in recitation of dogmas and creeds (though these may have some place and meaning in the life of a community of faith); it consists rather in concrete commitment to mercy and justice, in sincere service rendered to life and the liberation of peoples. Faith has an essential, internal, constitutive relation with the poor and the oppressed; with the dispossessed and the deprived; with the crucified of history with whom the Crucified of Calvary has established deep solidarity and intimate identity. To touch the poor (to gift life or inflict death) is to touch Jesus Christ.

4. Touch the wounds

The same structure of faith is implied in the story of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite, these two reli-

gious people, see the wounded man lying on the roadside, bleeding to death, but skirt him and pass by for reasons of their own. Jesus refuses to acknowledge their behaviour as theological or spiritual or faith-ful; he would not commend it for our following. What the Samaritan did, Jesus recommends: "Go and do the same yourself" (Lk 10:29-37). The Samaritan's action could not be worth our following if it did not have that essential dimension which alone justifies and saves. Faith like this lives and operates at levels deeper than and independent of creeds, rituals and religious systems.

The Samaritan's faith consisted not in hastening to any temple for prayer service or sacrifice, but in caringly touching and dressing the wounds of the man left dying on the roadside. True faith consists in similarly caring for all women and men left broken on the wayside of history by systems of exploitation and oppression, racism and slavery, conquest and colonialism and neo-colonial plunder. Unless we look closely and carefully at the holes nails have made in people's hands, unless we put our finger into those holes, and unless we put our hands into the pierced side of the victims of economic brigandage and political repression and the Hiroshimas and Auschwitzes and Bhopals and Sowetos of our scientific age, we cannot come by faith. When in commitment and compassion we discern that the marks on the starved and tortured bodies are those of Jesus (Gal 6:17), and in indignation and mercy we touch the wounds of the people to heal and to save, to organize and to fight, then faith takes hold of us, conceives and brings us forth to new life; it shapes and moulds us and enables us to cry with Thomas, "My Lord, and my God". We must believe without seeing; we cannot believe without touching. The link between saving faith and the wounds of the oppressed is unbreakable and constitutive. In the downtrodden and marginalised millions of the world Jesus keeps showing his wounds and calling to us: Put your finger here, give me your hand, touch his wound and this ebbing life, and cease being godless. Have faith (Jn 20:24-29).

5. A faith that works through love

For all his emphasis on faith versus works of the law, Paul does not in the least miss the life-dimensions of faith. He is clear that the faith that matters, the one that justifies

all irrespective of circumcision or of any such social-religious symbol, is the "faith that makes its power felt through love" (Gal 5:6). He commends love in the same breath in which he does faith.

"Serve one another in works of love, since the whole law is summarised in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself." (Gal 5:13-14)

"Let us be directed by the Spirit", and never yield to self-indulgence which is the opposite of the Spirit. Let us yield rather the harvest of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace etc. (Gal 5:16-26).

"We must never get tired of doing good ... While we have the chance we must do good to all." (Gal 6:9-10) That is why most letters of Paul end with exhortation to practice of love and service, unity and peace, and of the new life in which faith consists. "What matters is faith" means what matters is "to become an altogether new creature" (Gal 6:15). To have faith is to be in Christ, is to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

John says the same thing with the powerful image of being born again and from above through water and the Spirit (Jn 3:3-5). The fact is that whoever listens to Jesus' words and believes in the One who sent Jesus has already "passed from death to life", is reborn, is a new creation (Jn 5:24). What is said here of belief (and faith) is, in John's epistle, said of loving:

"We have passed out of death and into life; and of this we can be sure because we love our brothers and sisters." (I Jn 3:14)

Not to love is to remain dead and love, like faith, is not a matter of words or talk; love is "something real and active". If a man who is rich enough in this world's goods sees that a brother or sister is in need and opens his heart and hands and home to them, the love of God lives in him; he has love, he has faith. But if he closes his heart to their need, how could the love of God be in him? (I Jn 3:17-20). How could he claim to be committed in faith to the God of justice and life when the needy man's rights to part of human wealth lie dishonoured and violated and he makes no gesture of dissent? Such indifference or hardness of heart spells faithlessness and

godlessness. If that be so when riches are withheld from the needy, how much greater the atheism and idolatry of acts which snatch from children their rice or bread, from women their homes, from people their land, and from the masses their dignity and freedom as was done in imperialist conquests, in systems of slave trade and slave labour, in colonial plunder and in feudal-capitalist exploitation. All that was no revelation of love, no mission of faith; it was a global exhibition of greed organised into armed forces, warships, principalities and powers. And greed "is the same thing as worshipping a false god" (Col 3:5); and the only opponent and enemy of God that Jesus knows is mammon, money (Mt 6:24).

James develops the thought of Mt 7: it is not enough to hear the good news; not enough to repeat religious words; it is necessary to do God's will. It is not so much in the hearing as in the heeding that faith consists.

"To listen to the word and not obey is like looking at your own features in a mirror and then...immediately forgetting what you looked like. But the man who looks steadily at the perfect law of freedom and...actively puts it into practice, will be happy in all that he does." (Jas 1:23-25)

Pure religion, in fact, and real faith consists in

"coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world" (Jas 1:27).

Note once again how faith cannot be indicated without reference to the needy and action on their behalf. Taking his reflection on faith further, James asks us not to try "to combine faith in Jesus Christ with the making of distinctions between classes of people". Fawning on the rich and treating the poor with scant respect are not compatible with faith in Jesus Christ (Jas 2:19). Where the practice obtains faith perishes though religious words and rites persist like shells or old nests abandoned by birds. Our whole class culture stands unmasked as a force that undermines and subverts the christian faith. James is challenging the churches with their pastors and possibly honest rich christians to a self-examination which can prove deeply disturbing and, hopefully, healing. The claim to have faith without a good act is false and empty. If a brother or sister lacks food or clothes and I wish them well verbally without giving them the bare

necessities of life, my pious words mean nothing.

"Faith is like that: if good deeds do not go with it,
it is quite dead." (Jas 2:14-20,26)

And dead faith is as good as a dead horse: it will take us nowhere. James maintains that without good deeds to show it is impossible to prove that one has faith. The good deed is not only proof of faith offered to someone else, but proving and experiencing it ourselves; it is faith's reality in history. James concludes:

"You see it is by doing something good and not by believing, that a man is justified." (Jas 2.24)

Paul concurs when he says that people who knew God from God's self-revelation in nature but "refused to honour him as God or to thank him", became conceited and degraded themselves. Their perception of the Divine failed to mature and crystallise into worship and thanksgiving and good life, that is, into faith (Rom 1:21-25). Faith is much more than insights into the Divine and "his everlasting power and deity". Faith is active commitment. That is why Paul insists that God "will repay every one as his her works deserve", that is to say, according to the measure of their faith-commitment (cf. Rom 2:6-11; 22-24). Paul's thought is clear.

"It is not listening to the law but *keeping* it that will make people holy in the sight of God." (Rom 2:13)

There are people outside the Israelite community who by following their conscience *do* what the law commands though they possess no written law. That doing is authentic, saving faith, free of religious verbalism (Rom 2:14-16). On the other hand, Jews who commit stealing, adultery or idolatry cannot be considered men of faith despite their having the law and their preaching against such sins (Rom 2:17-24). To have faith is to do good.

"Pain and suffering will come to every human being who employs himself in evil — Jews first, but Greeks as well; renown, honour and peace will come to everyone who does good — Jews first, but Greeks as well." (Rom 2:9-11)

6. Jesus, the leader of our faith

The book of Revelation introduces Jesus as "the faithful witness" (Rev 1:5). Jesus was faithful to God and to us.

Faith must be counted among the grace-realities of which he was full and in which he grew (Jn 1:14-17; Lk 2:52). Jesus' faith consisted in his careful fulfilment of the task God had entrusted to him. It was a double task: (a) to convey to the world the revelation God had given him in its integrity and purity; and (b) to accomplish the 'work' for which God had anointed and sent him (Rev 1:1; Lk 4:18). This openness and response of Jesus to God was interior to (c) his openness and response to all human and cosmic reality. At the end of his life Jesus could say:

"Father, I have finished the work you gave me to do...

I have made your name known...

I have given them the teaching you gave me...

I passed your word to them; your word is truth" (Jn 17:4,6,8,14,17)

(a) When Jesus' critics were astonished at his teaching because Jesus had never done higher studies, he faithfully pointed to the source of his knowledge. "My teaching is not from myself; it comes from the One who sent me." (Jn 7:16)

But there is only one way to know whether the teaching is from God or from someone else. That unique way is our preparedness to do God's will. That is where faith shapes up, and faith it is that discerns what belongs to the realm of the Divine (Jn 7:17). This complex truth is never allowed to dim. It is always kept furbished. Jesus said:

"What I speak of is what I have seen with my Father; but you put into action the lessons learned from your father" (Jn 8:38). Again: "What I have spoken does not come from myself. What I was to say, was commanded by the Father who sent me, and therefore what the Father has told me is what I speak" (Jn 12:49). And again: "The words I speak to you I do not speak as from myself; It is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work." (Jn 14:10)

Jesus counts us not servants but friends; the basis of the friendship is the sharing of a secret.

"I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father." (Jn 15:15)

All this is consonant with the Synoptic confession that it is not flesh and blood that discloses to us the identity and the mystery of the Son of God, but 'my Father in heaven' (Mt 16:16-17). It is the Father that hides "these things from the learned and the

clever" and reveals them to mere children. And it is the Father who has entrusted everything to the poor man Jesus (Mt 11:25-28).

b) The other component of Jesus' faith and fidelity is to be found in the 'works' he carries out in obedience to the Father. "To do the will of the One who sent me and to complete his work" (Jn 4:34) is Jesus' food and the foundation of his life. As the Father goes on working, so does Jesus, never ceasing from creating and recreating our world, and breathing life into our nostrils.

"The Son can do only what he sees the Father doing: and whatever the Father does, the Son does too."

I can do nothing of myself...because my aim is to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me...

The works my Father has given me to carry out, these same works of mine testify that the Father has sent me". (Jn 5:17-19; 30,36; 6:38)

There is one special work, corresponding to a special command given by the Father: to be a good shepherd who lives for the sheep and dies in their defence. "so that they may have life and have it to the full".

"I am the good shepherd... and I lay down my life for my sheep... I lay it down of my own free will... and it is in my power to take it up again." "And this is the command I have been given by my Father." (Jn 10:10-18)

Jesus pointed to his works when the Jews pressed him to speak plainly and reveal his identity, if he were the Messiah. Jesus replied:

"I have told you..the works I do in my Father's name are my witness; but you do not believe me" (Jn 10:25). "If I am not doing my Father's work, there is no need to believe me, but if I am doing it, then, even if you refuse to believe me, at least believe in the work I do." (Jn 10:37-38)

The frequent recurrence of the theme of work and the centrality accorded it in this mystical Gospel of faith calls for more reflection than has so far been made on it. The suggestion here is that Jesus' works are his faith, at once saving, revelatory and transformative. That is but the beginning of the stream; it is meant to go on deepening and widening in the life of Jesus' followers.

"Whoever believes in me will perform the same works as

I do myself, he will perform even greater works." (Jn 14:12)
 (c) Some of the works Jesus did, seen as openness to the human condition and to life's situations, may illustrate the faith-content of everything he did in obedience, to the Father. To the human situation in Cana Jesus is open and responsive. This attitude and action hold in their depths an openness and response to the God of life and joy, which is what faith is all about. In what he did in Cana Jesus let his faith shine and his glory break out. And his disciples caught the flame and believed in him; and to believe in him is to believe in the One who sent him (Jn 2:1-11; 12:44). The signs Jesus gave are his faith-involvement in human life to liberate, enrich and exalt it.

This is also true of Jesus' intervention on behalf of the cripple at the pool of Bethzatha (Jn 5:1-18). The narrative seems to say that Jesus chose to contact the 'last' of the sick first — the one crippled longest, most neglected, wholly friendless and marginalised by competition. The question Jesus puts to the man, 'Do you want to be well again?', is meant to involve him in the healing process, and thus to evoke faith. Was this faith made explicit the second time Jesus met the man? (Jn 5:7,14). That the question of faith is central is evident from the meditation which follows (Jn 5:19-47). The point is the connection between faith and God's work of raising the dead. Those who listen to Jesus and believe in God have passed from death to life (Jn 5:21, 24-29, 37-38, 44-47).

The bread story in John 6 is a powerful symbol and evocation of faith. It is the account of a compassionate response to a human situation. The first affirmation made in the interpretation of the event is the key to the entire passage. A Jewish question about doing the works that God wants is answered in terms of faith.

"This is working for God: you must believe in the one he has sent." (Jn 6:28-29)

And the last significant affirmation in the chapter is a confession of faith countering the crisis of faith caused by Jesus' refusal to be King and his insistence on being accepted in his lowliness and powerlessness, in his fleshness. Simon Peter said,

"You have the message of eternal life, and we believe:

we know that you are the Holy One of God." (Jn 6:67-69)

The final response of the believer is not that you are the bread

of life, your flesh is food indeed or we shall eat your flesh; the final response penetrates to the meaning of the metaphors and accepts Jesus and his word as the basis of life. What lies in between is reflection on faith (and unfaith) mentioned explicitly (6:35,36,40,47,64) or enshrined in images of coming to Jesus, learning from the Father, eating the bread given from heaven, eating Jesus' flesh, eating him (6:35,37, 44-45, 50-51, 53, 57-58). All who believe in Jesus, who eat the Jesus-Bread, who eat the flesh of Jesus, who eat Jesus will be raised up and will have eternal life. Those who 'eat' him will draw life from him, just as he 'eats' (does the will of) the Father (Jn 4:34) and draws life from the Father. To draw life from Jesus and the Father is to live for ever, is to pass from death to life (Jn 6:57-58).

Jesus' intervention on behalf of the woman whom the law and its scribes and pharisees were condemning to death is an act of faith in a God wholly other than the god of the Pharisees' legalistic religion whose best offer to the sinner was death and despair. It is an act of faith in a God of mercy and life, who does not judge exclusively on the basis of deeds done in the past but on the basis of promises and possibilities for the future enshrined in human hearts and God's own love for the world. It is faith that saves. Jesus' faith in God and human possibilities saves the woman and lures her to similar saving faith, the lure being negatively expressed in the persuasion, 'Don't sin any more' (Jn 8:1-11).

Jesus, responding to the condition of a man blind from his birth, involves him in the faith and health process by asking him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. To this man sight and faith are born together. The ensuing debate with the Pharisees revolves round the question of faith and its genesis. The faith of the Pharisees lies in being disciples of Moses to whom God had spoken. The man healed of blindness, however, refuses to have his face turned exclusively to the past. For him (and for all Jesus' disciples) revelation did not close with Moses. He takes into account new signs of God's action in history. His openness to God's surprises today and tomorrow is his basic faith which later blossoms into the confession: 'Lord, I believe' (Jn 9:38). The two stories of the cripple and the blind man, healed in violation of Sabbath laws, are both framed within Jesus' faith that "My Father goes on working, and so do I." (Jn 5:17)

It is in the face of the tragedy of death that faith is most severely tested and most beautifully resurrected. The faith of Jesus comes face to face with death not only in the resurrection stories in Luke 7 and John 11, but in all the accounts of his dealing with diseases, mental disorders and handicapped conditions — all of them, death's kin. He responds to people's plight in compassion and concern, touching and lifting up people, sighing and shedding tears, and praying with loud cries (Mk 1: 29-31, 40-41; 5:41; 8:22-26; Lk 13:10-13; 19:41-42; Jn 11:32-37). He is with us in our death and deathly experiences. He identifies with the poor, the naked and all the wretched of the earth. He knows that openness to the truth of human beings is openness to the Truth of God. Assumed into Jesus' responsiveness and thus exposed to the Divine, the wounded find healing, the lame walk and the dead rise to life. Jesus lives his faith in all his healing and liberating interventions and involvements. He expresses it in words like:

"The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me...

He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,

to proclaim liberty to captives...and

to set the downtrodden free." (Lk 4:18)

He spells it out in assurances such as

"Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer.

I knew indeed that you always hear me" (Jn 11:41-42)
and in the cry, "Lazarus, come out",

and the order, "Untie him, let him go free" (Jn 11:43-44).

7. Faith

Jesus' faith encountered God in flowers and birds and the faces of the earth and the sky (Mt 6:26-30; 16:2-3; Lk 12:54-56), in the life around him and the plight of the people. He heard God's No to poverty and disease, to oppressive powers and worship of money, to indignity meted out to outcasts, and to the sadness of helpless existence. In the struggles of the people, in their resistance and revolt, in the revolutions of freedom, in the pursuit of equality and fellowship, Jesus heard the call of God to work to transform the situation and fashion a different world, based on justice, freedom and love. He accepted the call, spoke and acted. The more he responded to the cosmic and human reality around him, the intenser and profounder became his encounter with and experience of the Divine. His faith grew.

It was in history, in the people, in the downtrodden and their life that he met and heard and responded to God, not in cult and temple and sacred persons, rituals, laws and prohibitions. Faith is mercy, not sacrifice, — unless it be God's self-sacrifice implied in creation, in the cross and in forgiveness. Jesus rejected the cult of money as idolatrous, and repudiated the theology which saw in accumulation of wealth a sign of God's favour. Faith is not rigid legalism and sacrificing of people to Molechs of sabbath laws and purity traditions or religious verbalism. It consists rather in living into God's mercy and God's future (Jn 8:1-11). It consists in doing the truth and keeping the word. Faith has to do not with law and power and orthodoxy, but with the life-giving ways of God; with learning the meaning for life of God's word, "I will have mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt 9:13; 12:7; Hos 6:6).

Faith is a particular kind of life defined by justice and love. It is option for and solidarity with the poor and the oppressed (Mt 2:1-18; 5:3-14; 11:2-5, 25-28; 25:31-46; Lk 6:20-26). Faith is born of and consists in and lives by contact with the wounds of the crucified, of all the crucified with whom God in Christ is one. Faith is born in the discovery and experience of "My Lord and My God" in the brokenness of the oppressed when we touch it in solidarity and participation. The cross is Jesus' supreme act of faith, his faithfulness to God even when he was forsaken by God; and his faithfulness to us even when he was abandoned by us. In that faith of his both God and the human person are revealed as capable of unconditional love and of devotion beyond the mercenary; as capable of giving birth to Jobs whose faith is not tied to wealth and health; as enabling us to live out the Gita's vision of *Niṣkāmakarma* and *Lōkasamgraham*. Faith is what Jesus lived in the days of his weakness. It is that by which he risked his life for the liberation of the people.

Faith is what Mary did when she intervened in Cana on behalf of a poor family; and what she did when she opted for the God of the lowly, and offered to collaborate with him in his subversive activity of routing the insolent and the arrogant, of "pulling down princes from their thrones", of sending the rich empty away, of exalting the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things. Faith is what Mary did when she stood by Jesus as he hung on the cross, betrayed, condemned,

disowned, insulted, tortured, dying. Faith is what we do when we stand by all the crosses of history on which the powerful of the temple and the empire nail the poor.

Faith is more than believing that God exists or that Christ died for the world. It is not subscribing to a volume of information or a set of doctrines. It is no noetic thing, no mere act of the intellect, not primarily something cognitive and conceptual. "Faith is the connection with the beyond", with the transcendent, "however you choose to envision it" (R. Panikkar, *Intra-Religious Dialogue*, p. 18, 35). "Faith is a certain conception of the meaning of the human being and its social life" (J. L. Segundo, *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics*, p. 102). It is "an existential mode of human freedom itself, one which embraces both knowledge and action, belief and doing, so that all separation between christian dogmatics and ethics is overcome.... one's real faith is something like a fundamental option that is constituted by one's praxis. One's faith is synonymous with one's spirituality when spirituality is understood as the christian life and the sum total of one's understandings and beliefs, and decisions and actions" (R. Haight, *An Alternative Vision*, p. 10-13). Faith is a concrete commitment and a way of living together in a new, surprising way, challenging, luring and transforming the world. For Paul faith consists in entrusting our destiny to God and being free in this way from greed and anxiety, and free for involvement on the side of justice and love in view of a new world. Faith is the Yes we say with our whole person and life to God, to God's proffered frienship, and his project for our world.

Faith is not "belief in spite of evidence" though there is evidence; It is "life in scorn of consequences"; it is an adventure, a risk, a challenge. "Faith is an invitation to become lovers... It points to God as cosmic love and cosmic lover... It points to him as love faithfully and everlastingly at work, as it recognizes that he will use whatever good he receives, along with his own urgent desire for good, in furthering the expression of love in the creative advance which is the world" (N. Pittenger, *The Last Things*, p. 89). At the birth of faith and of the church is a committed relation to the poor. That relation is the spring where the river starts, and not merely a tributary enriching the faith. It is not just an ethical demand of the faith but consti-

tutes its very core. Conversion to Christ and conversion to the poor are one. Commitment to the cause of the poor does not come after the essential faith-experience has taken place; it constitutes the faith-experience (A. Durand OP, in *Vidyajyoti*, November 1989, p. 612ff). Faith is the day-to-day interpretation of history. God reveals himself to us in and by revealing the sense and meaning of day-to-day history. To believe God's revelation is to comprehend and embrace the meaning of history. That is why good done to the poor is good done to Jesus. Therefore

"The person who sees a free other in the poor and liberates the slave from Egypt is the person who truly loves God, for the slave in Egypt is the very epiphany of God himself. If a person opens up to the slave in Egypt he opens up to God; if he shuts out the slave in Egypt he shuts out God. The person who does not commit himself to the liberation of the slaves in Egypt is an atheist." (E. Dussel, *History and Theology of Liberation*, p. 6-7)

God's revelation to which faith is our response comes in history and as history, in events and as events, rather than as statements or doctrine. When spelt out, it takes the form of questions, exclamations, commandments, parables, prophetic gestures, and acts of compassion, solidarity, dissent, rebellion and revolution. Faith-response to these cannot be mere intellectual assent. The response will be wonder, joy, love, surrender, commitment and cooperation. Neither revelation nor faith can be adequately placed in books or catechisms (no matter how universal or particular). They cannot be "taught" in an objective way in an academic milieu; nor in a class-room by teachers, rod in hand; nor learned by heart and reproduced in examinations; nor imposed under threat of torture, of burning at the stake, or deprivation of job and livelihood. They can only be "caught" in a community where they are lived, from persons who love us and whom we love, respect and trust, not from those whom we fear for their power to hurt, to deprive us of work or rice, and cause us social embarrassment and isolation. Faith thus caught and lived is expressed in myths, stories, symbols, rituals, beliefs and celebrations. Faith cannot be equated with any of these symbols, but faith needs some symbols to be faith, to be embodied and human, historical and effective. The symbols are not faith, they convey and evoke faith.

"Let us not, then, lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings us to perfection; for the sake of the joy which was still in the future, he endured the cross, disregarding the shamefulfulness of it." (Heb 12:2)

8. Unfaith

Unfaith would consist in saying, 'Lord, Lord', with no care to do God's will. And God's will is that the hungry be fed, the naked clothed, the homeless sheltered, the outcast be returned to social dignity, prisons be opened, justice reign, the downtrodden be set free, love be life's rule and life be abundant for all his children on the earth. Unfaith is to turn away from a brother or a sister in need, and to let the prisons stand. Atheism can ask, 'Am I my brother's keeper'? That question can be posed even by those who know that God exists. "Demons have the same belief, and they tremble with fear" (Jas 2:11). Recitation of creeds and performance of ritual are quite compatible with atheism. History does not lack examples of individuals, groups and nations who have indulged heartily in orgies of war and conquest, massacre and genocide, treachery and oppression, all in God's name, while saying their prayers.

To be a slave of money is to exclude or deny or subordinate God and be idolatrous or atheistic. Luke 12 has the story of a rich man congratulating himself on his accumulated wealth and entrusting his future to it. God's angel laughs at him and calls him fool. According to Jesus riches camelize and brutalise people. The Big Eater of Luke 16, symbol of super-affluent consumerist culture, in his inability to respond and relate meaningfully and humanly to the famished and stricken Third World he had created at his gate is the picture of godlessness and hell. He was dead before he died, buried in the dishes with which he was gorging himself, and had become a thing. In the judgment passage in Matthew 25, the refusal to be responsive to the cry of the dispossessed is seen as damning unfaith. There the Son of Man says:

"Go away from me with your curse upon you...For I was hungry and you never gave me food...I was a stranger and you never made me welcome; naked, and you never clothed me...In so far as you neglected to do this to one of the

least of these, you neglected to do it to me." (Mt 25:31-46)

Openness to the Divine develops only in the womb of openness to the human and the cosmic; it is from there that it comes to birth, and to flower and to fruit.

Two healing stories and a parable (Jn 5 and 9; Lk 10) identify rigid legalistic religion as unfaith. In the Samaritan story, two religious people fail to respond to the call of wounded humanity and endangered life. They must have had their own good religious reasons for behaving the way they did. But in Christ's final count they do not figure; they are no examples to follow of faith or spirituality; the secular Samaritan is. In John 5 the Jews prove incapable of registering and responding to the newness and the wonder of the grace of healing for a man after thirty eight years of crippled existence, their spirits have become stuck in a point of the law, and they cannot extricate themselves. The result: they miss the presence and action of the living God, and keep worshipping some legal abstraction. The Jews in John 9 are no different. They have recourse to every device to avoid having to face the fact of a sign wrought in their midst. They have a painful option for the God of the law and the past against the Living God active to heal and save among his people. Defeated in their tortuous logic by the straightforwardness of the healed man, they turn abusive and authoritarian: a subtle and profound portrayal by John of unfaith and sin against the light. The God the Pharisees accept is one wholly contained in and exhausted by traditional legal prescriptions. This God of theirs is not expected nor permitted to disturb existing religious arrangements with any new revelation, intervention, word or sign. It is this idol that clashes with Jesus whose God lives, gives life, acts and surprises. Faith is endless openness to the God of surprises. The temptation of organised religions is to legalize and freeze faith and silence God. God may not speak except as permitted by the powers that own and control religion. The Pharisees said, "We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this man (Jesus) we don't know where he comes from" (Jn 9:29). For the Pharisee revelation closes with the death of Moses; for religious powers revelation comes to a close with the death of the last apostle. Both are keen on a

silent and domesticated God; they are afraid of a living and free God. He might speak freedom and life to illiterate Joans, or Cuban peasants, or children in Soweto or little Gitanjali in the cancer ward, and then revolutions might start, and control systems might be shaken and set aside. Therefore put any God who speaks of freedom and acts outside the law in the Grand Inquisitor's prison, and burn the Maids to whom such undisciplined God may have spoken.

Vatican II holds that salvation is available even to those who have never come to an explicit knowledge of God, provided they, enabled by grace, are obedient to their conscience (LG 16; cf. Rom 2). If they are saved, they have saving faith, a faith independent of and transcending set beliefs, dogmas, religious symbols, systems and powers, faith which is fundamental, universal, anthropological openness to human values which give meaning to human persons and their social existence. Others who only say 'Lord, Lord' and do not obey, have no faith. Who then can tell the faithful from the faithless? or theists from atheists, in the world or in the church? No one, least of all rulers of religions and churches, should claim clear and certain knowledge in this matter so as to organize purges and pogroms in the church. In the church and in history the first may be last and the last, first. As Augustine said, 'Christ has many whom the church does not have, and the church has some whom Christ does not have'. The most spiritual thing to do, then, is to be a bit modest and sober about truth-claims and orthodoxies and purity-of-faith talks and purges. The christian thing to do is to attend to the planks and beams in our own eyes before pointing a contemptuous finger at the publican beating his breast; and to pay some attention to the criteria Jesus has given us: mercy and justice and good faith; and feeding the hungry, homing the homeless, and moving to the safety of the Inn all who are broken and left on the wayside of history, and struggling to eliminate mind-sets and structures which create world hunger, widespread homelessness and massive human degradation; and keep saying with the anguished father of the epileptic boy, 'We do have faith, Help the little faith we have' (Mk 9:25).

Discussion Forum

ITA Statement on Religious Pluralism

The Statement of the thirteenth annual meeting of the Indian Theological Association (Dec. 28-31, 1989) touches a theological issue that is very vital for all religious people in India today. How Christians view other religions and their own professed mission to "preach the Gospel to all peoples" should interest all. The document, however, seems to be deliberately vague, I suppose, in order to elicit critical comments and encourage an ongoing discussion on our missions. The concept of religion taken for granted in the document, the model and standard adopted for judging all religions, the specific role of Christianity and of Christians in the pluralistic context and the implications of pluralism are all questions that call for clear answers from responsible theologians.

1. *The fact of Religious Pluralism:* Religious pluralism is not anything new. The Buddhist emperor Asoka in his Rock Edict XII gave the classical answer to that problem and it is relevant even today: "One should not honour only one's own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honour others' religions for this or that reason. So doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions..." Vatican II in its document on religious freedom has clearly stated that religious freedom is a right not only of individuals but of communities and religions as well. So stress on tolerance, empathy, compassion, peace, openness and mutual dialogue is the basic

demand of religious pluralism. But at the same time has not one to make clear that pluralism demands that each religion should justify its existence demonstrating the unique contribution it makes to people in guiding them to their ultimate destiny?

2. *The Concept of Religion*: The first question one has to put to the sponsors of the ITA statement is the very concept of religion they are working with. Is not the concept itself pluralistic with only an analogical unity? When we have religions like Buddhism and Jainism that do not recognize the existence of a divine reality as necessary for religion, how can one speak of "a wider and more universal experience of God who is the Saviour of all" (No. 19), the 'Great Religion' in which all religions participate (No. 20) and "the inherent limitation" of the specific Christian understanding of God in Christ, in the light of "the ineffable mystery of God" (No. 18). Is even Christianity essentially and specifically the manifestation of "the inexhaustible mystery" of God, or "God's self-communication through Jesus Christ?" If it is, have Christians anything specific to communicate to the Hindus who claim to experience God directly in the cave of their hearts? The Vatican document on Divine Revelation tells us that the scope of the divine self-disclosure in Christ is to reveal man to man, and the Trinity of God comes into the picture only as the ultimate fulfilment of human life in divine fellowship. Religion is not an ontology of God for man but rather an anthropology of man before God. Should we not look for the convergent divergence of religions in man himself, his ultimate salvation they seek to attain? Should not our main concern be to explain not a supposed equality of religions, but rather their unity in the one universal economy of human salvation?

3. *The Relevance of Liberation Theology Model for India*: Another source of questions may be the attempt to recover "the liberative core of religious manifesting itself as a liberation-salvation process"(14). The statement says: "...religions have often become great obstacles to liberative praxis. These distortions are based on categories that make religions ahistorical in their concern and dichotomising and spiritualizing in their interpre-

tation" (No. 13). Nobody will deny that religion is first and foremost praxis and that dogma is only an abstraction. In fact, the recent emphasis on praxis is a retrieval of the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis* (practical wisdom, prudence) which shows that reason in the first instance deals with the concrete and only as a second intention moves on to theory. Since praxis is the fruit of sustained self-determination through critically reflective appropriation of values by the living tradition of one's community, this new approach restores tradition back to its position as a carrier of authentic values.

But liberation theology of Latin America is a different matter. As Latin American theologians readily admit, only in a secularised world, where religious values have lost their meaning in the context of historical vicissitudes do the socio-political, economic and cultural aspects of liberation assume priority and primacy. This is particularly the case with Latin America. Should not the Indian theologians think seriously about the relevance and meaning of such socio-political and economic over-emphasis in human liberation in a country like ours where the great majority of people still live in a sacral world? When the moral and religious outlook of Ramayana and Mahabharata constitutes the broad context of people's lives, economic and political liberation can come only as the conclusion of a total spiritual liberation. Even the Bible speaks of human liberation in a primarily religious context. That is why Biblical scholars complain that the use of Biblical texts by liberation theologians often does violence to the Bible. Similarly the theological outlook of the Oriental churches in India is to expand the sacral atmosphere of the disciples surrounding the Risen Lord, specifically expressed in the liturgy, into the whole world. Liberation theology in its Latin American form is definitely a product of Western culture. Is its excessive use as *the* model and norm to judge all religions really prudent and helpful?

4 *Understanding of Other Religions.* One specific question in the context of pluralism is how one can come to a proper understanding of other religions. The statement says that we should not attempt a scientific study of other religions nor a

comparison of them, because those will be a view from a distance and would lack authenticity and credibility (No. 7). "We want to express what the plurality of the religions we meet every day of our lives in India means to us as believers" (No. 8). But is not perceiving them "as signs of the Absolute Presence", superimposing on them our specific religious self-understanding, and using our system of religion to judge systems like Buddhism which explicitly deny such "Absolute Presence" unfair? As Buddha states in his famous *Kalamasutta* experience may be the best way to understand one's own faith. But how can we do justice to faiths of other peoples except through a scientific study of their religious texts, comparison of different religions and an active dialogue with those who follow those religions?

5. *What is the Bottom Line?* The most obscure part of the statement is its conclusion: What is the specific role of Christians in a pluralistic India? "The identity of Christian community like that of Christ, the man-for-the-other ... will be in its relatedness to the rest of the human community." Does this mean that Christianity's mission is merely to unfold and illumine "the ineffable riches of the religious heritage with which the Spirit of the Lord has endowed our land" (37)? Should we not emphasize that Christian mission has two functions: *kerygma* and *diakonia*, proclamation and service. Gospel is the good news that human salvation accomplished in Christ is not a fulfilment on the level of the creature, nor a discovery of the divine ground of one's being, but fellowship in the Son with the Father and the Spirit? Who has the right to keep this unique Christian insight into salvation a secret? "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" Christian service is also unique, stresses the unity of the human family and human history and works towards realizing God's rule and kingdom inaugurated in Christ. Religious pluralism and

dialogue in that pluralistic context should not be an obstacle but an incentive for working towards these specific goals of the Christian mission!

I hope the sponsors of the ITA statement will be generous enough to clarify these issues for the Christians and all believers of other religions too.

John B. Chethimattam

Book Reviews

Alance Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism. Patterns in Christian theology of religions*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983, pp, xi, 169, \$ 8.95.

The Christian theology of religions realizes that the Christian theology cannot develop in the latter part of the twentieth century without giving conscious recognition to other communities of living faith vastly different from the Christian, existing alongside of Christians. Awareness of the strengths and values of other world religions challenges the claim of Christianity to be the one true absolute religion. Besides the theoretical questions like how other religions like Sikhism and Buddhism accord with the purposes of God, how people can be saved in other religions, and the distinction between revelation and religions, there are also practical questions regarding local community life, education, and sharing of buildings or places of worship.

One consoling fact for Christians in all the variety of religions is that God is active in human history saving human beings in various ways. Without attempting any syncretism one can approach religions in an ecumenical outlook seeing them all united in the concrete Spirit, and Christ as the principle of the process of creative transformation, giving always priority to personal faith of men and women.

The author himself declares preference for an action-christology which accepts pluralism as the most positive Christian response to the encounter between Christianity and the world faiths. As he states quoting F. Young, the Christian gift to the world is Jesus...whose impact has nevertheless created such powerful images in men's minds that he is for millions the way, the truth and the life. This does not exclude the distinct contributions made to the God-man dialogue by adherents of other faiths. For Christ cannot be considered without reference too God's world in which everything is coloured by the

specific peculiarities of individuals, cultures and individual circumstances. In the words of Paul Tillich in every religion including Christianity there is a point at which religion loses its importance and what matters is the elevating spiritual freedom. Thus religious pluralism is not a denial of the uniqueness of Christianity but belongs to its incarnational essence.

Ignacio Ellacuria, *Freedom Made Flesh, The Mission of Christ and His Church*, trs. John Drury, with Foreword by Lawrence A. Egan, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

"Today the world is being secularized in a positive sense, in other words, it is abandoning a religious form of existence to don an areligious form of existence." So if the growth of the *saeculum* and the decline of the sacral-religious realm are facts only a secularized faith and theology can have complete meaning for an increasingly secularized world. This is the supposition against which Latin American liberation theology took shape.

We are in a highly politicized world. Politicization is a historical process. So there is a definite transition from being-as-nature to being-as-history in the constitution of the social man. So his salvation also cannot be ahistorical and purely ideological. God's word to man is a historical word, so that the Revealer of the Father became history. Jesus claimed to be the Messiah-King and for this he was put to death as a political criminal. As Christ was a sign of contradiction in history, his church's mission also has to take on that social, political, historical role to proclaim the Good News of liberation in the concrete human context today.

This has particular significance in the institutionalized violence of Latin America, where people's slavery was created through centuries of history. It is not the methods of violence nor even its cruelty that determines its sinfulness but that it has been perpetuated in the name of religion and justice. Just as rebellion against justice is sinful, submission to institutionalized violence in the name of a sacralized status quo is

also sinful. In Jesus' time "take up your cross" had a special meaning: it was the punishment meted out by the Romans on the freedom fighters of the subjugated peoples. So today proclaiming the freedom brought to humanity by Christ is first and foremost to be willing to suffer the consequences of fighting against the slavery imposed in the name of law and order and status quo. Only bearing that "cross" of the social and political struggle can salvation itself be made palpable and relevant.

The Bible overflows with an authentic and original thrust towards liberation in all its forms, ranging from the innermost problems of individuals to the socio-political struggle of the chosen people. The Christian interpretation of social disorder and oppression as sin must be consistent and must be pursued to its proper logical conclusion of redemption. The sacrificial aspect of the Mass reminds us that Christian liberation must be redemptive liberation in the strict sense. Mere repetitions of a liturgical ritual will not do much to enhance the Mass or those who stick to its fixed formulas. The penitential, prophetic and sacrificial features of a liberation struggle culminating in the shared communion of the fruits by the people will constitute the true Liturgy. This according to Ellacuria is the essence of liberation theology.

John B. Chethimattam